

Takehaya
Illust: Poco

V INADERS OF THE ROKU JUMA !?

17





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“THEIA, YOU
REALLY ARE
A KIND
GIRL...”

“IT’S ONLY
OBVIOUS
FOR A
DAUGHTER
TO WISH
FOR HER
MOTHER’S
HAPPINESS.”







“WHO
ARE YOU,
MISTER?”

DAD
INVADES?!

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Welcome, Father!

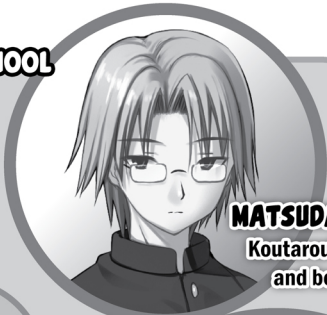
Afterword

**STUDENTS OF
KISSHOUHARUKAZE HIGH SCHOOL**



KASAGI SHIZUKA

Unquestionably strong.
Koutarou's classmate and the
landlord of Corona House.



MATSUDAIRA KENJI

Koutarou's childhood
and best friend.



SATOMI KOUTAROU

Our protagonist, and the
formal tenant of room 106.
Also the Blue Knight.



SAKURABA HARUMI

The president of the knitting
society that Koutarou joins.
She's one year his senior,
and a little sickly.



**UNDERGROUND
DWELLERS**

KURANO KIRIHA

A crafty woman who pretended to be
plotting to invade the surface while
searching for the person she loved.

**RESIDENTS OF
CORONA HOUSE**

INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!?
FACTIONS MAP

MAIN BODY



AIKA MAKI

A former member of the evil magical girl group, Darkness Rainbow. She currently lives together with Shizuka.



GHOSTS



HIGASHIHONGAN SANAE

The ghost girl haunting room 106, reborn into the land of the living.



NIJINO YURIKA

A girl who came to warn about the dangers of room 106. Turns out she's an actual magical girl.



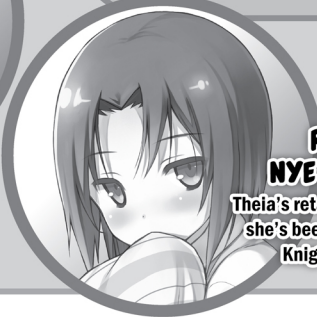
THEIAMILLIS GRE FORTHORTHE

A princess who came from outer space as part of a trial for imperial succession. Currently in exile alongside her mother.



**CLARIOSSA
DAORA FORTHORTHE**

A former rival princess to Theia. Lately, Koutarou's been relying on her whenever something comes up.

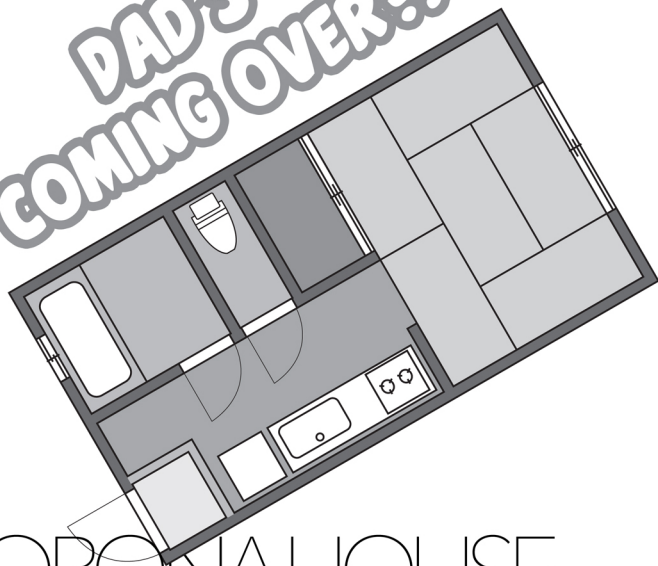


ALIENS

**RUTHKANIA
NYE PARDOMSHIHA**

Theia's retainer and assistant. Lately, she's been training under the Blue Knight, who she admires.

DAD'S
COMING OVER?!



CORONA HOUSE
ROOM 106

Up Until Now and From Now On

Wednesday, August 4th

The summer sun was mercilessly shining down from above. It was the kind of weather where you could feel your skin instantly start to tan as soon as you walked outside. It was too much for most people, but there was a certain group outside right now who didn't seem to feel that way at all. In fact, it was quite the opposite. They all wore dazzlingly bright smiles reminiscence of the sparkling, clear sea that stretched out before them.

"Yahoo! It's the beach!"

Sanae threw off the coverup she'd been wearing, revealing the swimsuit she had on underneath, and immediately began running for the water. Each bounding step she took shook the many frills on her swimsuit. She had eagerly been awaiting this day, and was unable to hold it in any longer as soon she laid eyes on the big, blue ocean.

"Sanae, wait. Make sure you stretch before you get in."

But as quick as she was to run off, there was someone equally quick to douse that burning enthusiasm of hers. It was none other than Koutarou, who had come to the beach with her. Sanae only made it two or three steps before he grabbed her arm and stopped her. To a former athlete like him, stretching before serious exercise like swimming was just common sense.

"Okay, I'll make sure she does!"

"Huh?!"

However, as it turned out, Koutarou had only really grabbed half of Sanae. He was holding Sanae-san's arm, and Sanae-chan was still making a beeline for the water.

"Jeez, that girl..."

Koutarou watched her run off with a wry smile.

"I'm... sorry."

Sanae-san drooped her shoulders and apologized to Koutarou. Though it looked like Sanae had split in half, Sanae-san and Sanae-chan were still ultimately the same person. Sanae-san too had gotten carried away like Sanae-chan had, and her face turned red with embarrassment.

"Well, I guess she's at least matured a little if she ran off by herself rather than dragging you along too."

Koutarou knew that nothing would come from scolding Sanae-san.

She was conscientious as it was, and she was so introverted that being hard on her might only make that worse.

“Um, K-Koutarou-san, I’ll do my best stretching to make up for Sanae-chan...”

Sanae-san’s face was beet red. Sanae-chan had told her in advance that while they were at the beach, she would give her every possible opportunity to talk to Koutarou herself. It was harder than it seemed for such a shy girl.

“Don’t worry. She’ll be right back anyways.”

“Huh?!”

Sanae-san’s heart almost stopped. She thought for a moment that Koutarou had figured out her deal with Sanae-chan.

“Koutarou, Koutarou! The beach is boring without a body! I can’t touch the water!”

“See?”

“Oh, haha...”

But fortunately for her, Koutarou was none the wiser. Sanae-san laughed a bit to herself in relief.

Today, Koutarou had brought all his friends to the beach for a little bit of summer vacation. The group consisted of him, the nine invaders, Kenji, and the five members of the cosclub, plus the two haniwas. With such a big crowd, just setting up all the blankets and beach umbrellas for everyone was quite a workout.

“Well, that should do it...”

After setting up his fifth umbrella, Koutarou decided to take a load off. He then suddenly felt something cold press up against his cheek.

“Whoa!”

“Good work, Koutarou.”

“Thank you for your diligence, Master.”

In the midst of his surprise, both Theia and Ruth greeted Koutarou. Theia was in an elegant, white swimsuit, while Ruth had chosen one that was simple yet cute. Koutarou looked down and realized that chill on his cheek was a cold plastic bottle Theia was offering him.

“Oh, it’s just you, Theia. Don’t scare me like that.”

“Hmph, this is a display of my affection. Just accept it.”

“You just wanted to startle me, didn’t you?”

Koutarou accepted the bottle with a suspicious glance in Theia’s direction. And rather than apologizing, she responded with a smile.

“You could say that... It seems you’ve finally started to understand the feelings of your lord, Koutarou.”

“That’s not a good thing in this case, you know...”

Koutarou removed the cap from the bottle, watching Theia as she

grinned. She'd brought Koutarou his favorite cola. And not even the diet kind. She'd sprung for the sugary kind he preferred.

"Master, I'm sorry for surprising you," said Ruth, lowering her head and blushing slightly.

"No, that's okay, Ruth-san."

Koutarou was confused as to why Ruth was apologizing, but Theia was quick to explain.

"Koutarou, why are you only forgiving Ruth? This was her idea."

It was true; Ruth had been the one to suggest pressing the bottle up to Koutarou's cheek. So Theia wanted to know why she was being held responsible for the crime when Ruth was the real mastermind.

"That's..."

"Your Highness, Master has also forgiven you. But as a man, he's just being stubborn."

"Koutarou, is that true?"

Theia looked up at Koutarou, wide-eyed.

"U-Uh..."

Koutarou stumbled for an answer. What Ruth had said was true, but it was extremely difficult to admit in a situation like this. So he avoided answering altogether by taking a nice, long swig out of the freshly opened bottle in his hands.

"Ahhh! Now that's the stuff!"

The cold liquid and bubbling carbonation felt great in his dry throat. While he'd only taken a drink to get out of his predicament, it was a welcome treat after setting up so many blankets, chairs, and umbrellas.

"See, Your Highness?"

"Indeed... Heh..."

"Heehee..."

Looking at Koutarou, Theia and Ruth began giggling. Embarrassed, he took another swig of cola.

"Koutarou, give some to me too."

Theia thrust an open hand out to Koutarou. She had been in a bad mood just a moment ago, but now she was in high spirits as she looked up at Koutarou with a refreshing smile.

"Did you really buy this because you wanted to drink it yourself?"

"Certainly not. It was an act of pure goodwill. However, the ideal relationship between master and servant is one where everything is shared."

"...You're really only a princess when it suits you."

"Of course. I'm your princess, after all," Theia replied, sounding especially proud.

What she's actually saying hasn't changed all that much since we first met, but...

In the past, Koutarou probably would have objected to what Theia said. But now her words moved him for some reason. She was ultimately saying the same thing, but the feeling behind it was different.

“Okay, okay.”

Relenting, Koutarou handed the bottle over to Theia, who then passed it along to Ruth.

“Here. You have some too.”

“Your Highness?”

“Koutarou is not my only vassal.”

“...”

Ruth hesitated a moment and then looked at Koutarou, who nodded.

“Then I don’t mind if I do.”

After getting Koutarou’s approval, she put her lips to the bottle and gently lifted it to take a sip. It was a far more elegant way of drinking than Koutarou’s chugging.

“Thank you very much, Your Highness, Master.”

Not only was the way she drank dainty, she’d only taken a dainty sip. And after wetting her whistle, Ruth passed the bottle back to Theia.

“Now it’s my turn.”

Unlike Ruth, Theia didn’t hesitate to put her lips to the bottle. Nor did she show the same reserved manners Ruth had while drinking. The childish way she gulped the cola down almost made her look like a hungry baby with its bottle.

“Hey, don’t drink all of it.”

“Ahhh... I know. Here.”

After taking a nice long swig of the drink, Theia returned the bottle to Koutarou. There was still plenty left for him. What she’d said about sharing hadn’t been a lie.

“I don’t know of any princesses who hand out half-drunk drinks...”

“Hmph, of course not.”

“Hmm?”

“You and I aren’t just any master and servant, after all.”

Theia folded her hands over her heart and smiled at Koutarou as she inclined her head a little to the side. Her smile and eyes were filled with confidence and trust, and just behind Theia, Ruth was looking at Koutarou the same way. It was clear they shared feelings on the matter.

“...You really are unfair...”

Koutarou flashed a bitter smile as he took another swig of the cola. It still felt great in his parched throat, but he was too distracted by the bright smiles of the girls to really notice much this time.

When Sanae saw Theia and Ruth, she invited them over to stretch with her. She was eager to jump in the water as quickly as possible. Theia, who loved exercise, quickly agreed. And, of course, Ruth didn't have any objections. The three of them lined up to stretch together.

"Make sure you stretch properly," reminded Koutarou.

"I know, I know. Right, Theia?"

"We aren't children. Have a little faith in us."

"Well, Ruth-san's with you, so you'll probably be fine."

"Please leave it to me, Master."

Koutarou glanced at the three girls out of the corner of his eye as he unloaded their luggage in the shade of the beach umbrellas. Aside from Koutarou, everyone else had dropped off their things to go get changed. And lugging luggage for sixteen people was quite a chore. Koutarou had to make several trips back and forth to get it all.

"Let me help you."

That was when a fourth girl appeared and offered to help Koutarou. It was Kiriha, who was wearing a t-shirt overtop of her swimsuit. It was actually Koutarou's, so it was more than large enough to conceal her curves underneath.

"That'll be great— Hey!"

"Hmm?"

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing special. I just thought I'd try showing you how I felt before helping. Think of it as a little token of my love."

Instead of carrying some of the bags, Kiriha had embraced Koutarou from behind. She held him firmly, but not too tightly. Koutarou could have easily shaken her off if he'd wanted to.

"Stop it. What if someone's watching?"

"Don't worry. I made sure to look."

Kiriha pressed her cheek against Koutarou's shoulder and closed her eyes. She was smiling. She was so happy that she couldn't help it.

"That's not what I meant."

"If you hate me, then just say so."

"I'm troubled precisely because I *don't* hate you."

"I see. That's good enough of a reason to stop."

Hearing Koutarou admit he was troubled, Kiriha easily gave up and let go of him. Because of his tragic childhood, Koutarou had a tendency to avoid making connections with other people. While it was a problem that needed to be addressed eventually, nothing good would come from forcing the issue right now. Troubling Koutarou wasn't Kiriha's intention. And besides, she'd won a small victory in getting him to admit that he didn't hate her, so she was more than satisfied for now.

“Have mercy on me. No more surprise attacks.”

“Heh, I told you I was invading.”

Kiriha giggled with a mischievous grin. The other day, she'd declared that she was going to invade Koutarou's life. Ever since, she'd been much more direct about expressing her love for him. But she didn't want to make him or the other girls uncomfortable, so she always made sure to choose the right time and place.

“It's bad for my heart.”

“You'll get used to it eventually. I'm going to stay in your life, remember?”

“Kiriha-san, you're really at your worst right now.”

“I'm fully aware.”

Kiriha laughed a bit before picking up her own bags. She was serious about helping him.

“However... I honestly have no intention of troubling you or the others.”

“I know. So no more springing things on me out of the blue, okay?”

“Heh, do you understand what you're really asking me?”

“What?”

“To take my sweet time with you.”

“Jeez... It's even worse knowing you're doing this on purpose...”

Koutarou didn't have any proper defenses in place against Kiriha's invasion. In fact, he had countless reasons to hug her right back.

“I told you I was invading for real this time.”

In the past, Kiriha had explained to Koutarou that a real invasion was never immediately identifiable as such. If it were too obvious, the defender would realize it and promptly take appropriate countermeasures. That was why Kiriha's invasions were always peaceful and subtle, and that was what she was in the middle of right now.

With Kiriha's help, Koutarou made quick work of moving all the luggage. Now that all the work was done, a smiling Kiriha was sitting next to Koutarou in the shade of the umbrellas. Koutarou was taking a break after all the heavy lifting, and Kiriha was happily accompanying him.

“Satomi-saaan! Kiriha-saaan!”

But before long, they heard someone calling out to them. When they turned to look, they spotted Yurika in a cute, pink swimsuit...

“Ugeh!”

...Who promptly tripped and got a face full of sand. But she didn't let that stop her. She got right back up and cheerfully ran over to Koutarou and Kiriha.

“Are you okay, Yurika?”

“Oh, I’m fine! Hmm, hmm-hmm-hmm!”

She then began rummaging through her bag while humming and pulled out a life vest, a float, and a large pair of diving goggles. Yurika couldn’t swim to save her life, so she’d come fully prepared. With all her gear on, you could barely see her cute swimsuit underneath.

“I’ll be safe with these.”

“Yurika, is there even a point in going swimming if you have to go that far?”

Koutarou couldn’t understand why Yurika was so excited to go swimming when it meant going to all this trouble. He was especially floored that the chronically destitute Yurika had sprung for a life vest.

“Of course there is. The water is cold and feels great. Best of all, unlike the pool, the beach is free.”

Yurika believed that an initial investment was necessary to get maximum mileage out of this natural resource. Since swimming in the ocean didn’t cost her a single yen, she could come back and enjoy it as many times as she wanted.

“But that was expensive, right?”

“I’ll be fine with you supporting me for a while, Satomi-san.”

Based on what Yurika was saying, it sounded like she’d spent her entire life savings on the life vest. Hearing that, Koutarou shouted at her with a stern voice.

“You idiot! How many times do I have to tell you not to waste your money?!”

“So you’re saying it’d be fine if I was the only one who couldn’t go swimming in the ocean?”

“Put some effort in learning how to swim!”

“That wasn’t possible in the few days we had to get ready for coming to the beach.”

“Koutarou, I have to say Yurika is in the right this time... You’d best support her for a while.”

“Ugh... I guess I have no choice...”

Thinking about it calmly, Koutarou knew that Yurika was right. It was impossible to learn how to swim in just a few days. And Yurika was so bad off that she wouldn’t even go near the water without a float. It would’ve been far too sad to have her at the beach like that, so Koutarou begrudgingly acquiesced and agreed to support her for a while.

“Really?!”

“Just this once, got it?”

“Yes, sir!”



Yurika happily nodded in agreement. She knew she'd be okay now—at least for a time.

“Satomi-san, Satomi-san, let's get some fried corn!”

Yurika put her hands together in front of her chest and looked up at Koutarou with sparkling eyes. On her way here, Yurika had spotted several different food stalls that had caught her interest. And if Koutarou was going to support her, she wanted to try all of them.

“Don't get full of yourself.”

A sharp snapping sound rang out.

“I-I'm sorry... I got a little ahead of myself...”

“As long as you understand.”

“Y-Yes, sir.”

Yurika nodded as she held her forehead. Koutarou only ever hit his enemies and those important to him. She knew she was in the clear as long as Koutarou would still whop her on the head like that, but if she went too far, he would eventually stop. She wanted to avoid that at all costs.

“Also, you better stretch properly before you get in the water.”

“Whaaaat?! But I have a life jacket and float!”

“Not good enough. You need to get in at least a little practice. You can't depend on those forever.”

“Uhhh...”

Yurika hesitated. She'd fully intended to rely on her gear forever, but when she thought about it now, it didn't seem like such a good idea. A magical girl in a life vest and float was a bit too much.

“Kiriha-san, could you take turns with me teaching Yurika how to swim?”

“Gladly.”

Either Koutarou or Kiriha would be enough to teach Yurika, but someone would have to stay with her constantly. If just one of them took the job, they'd never get to enjoy the beach for themselves. Alternating would solve the problem.

“But I want to get to play too...” Yurika whined.

“I know. You can do what you want after lunch.”

“You promise?!”

“Yeah.”

Koutarou wasn't doing this to be mean, so he would only make her work for the first half of the day. She could do whatever she wanted after that, which would also give them a chance to all play together.

“Then let's go, Nijino Yurika.”

“Already?!”

“The sooner we can start, the sooner we can stop.”

“Okay, I’ll try my best.”

“That’s more like it.”

Kiriha took Yurika with her as she headed for the water. Yurika seemed more ambitious than before. Her studying with Koutarou had a slow but steady effect on her.

Shizuka and Maki appeared right around the time Kiriha walked off with Yurika. They seemed to have gotten quite close after Maki moved in to room 206 with Shizuka, and they often spent a lot of time together. They were together even now, but all Koutarou could see was Shizuka wearing a bikini and sarong. Maki was hiding behind her for some reason.

“Aika-san, what are you getting embarrassed for now after coming this far?”

“This... This doesn’t suit me...”

“It’s fine. Satomi-kun doesn’t care.”

“I’m basically in my underwear...”

“What? Come on now.”

Shizuka pulled on Maki’s hand in an attempt to drag her in front of Koutarou, but Maki resisted. She was putting up quite a fight.

“You’re surprisingly stubborn.”

“That’s because I can’t show myself in front of Satomi-kun wearing something so shameless!”

“Jeez, already! Satomi-kun, I know it’s hot, but could you come out from under the umbrella?”

“S-Sure...”

With no idea what was going on, Koutarou crept out from under the parasol looking rather puzzled.

“Now... behold!”

“No, no, nooo!”

Emerging from the shade of the umbrella, Koutarou could finally see Maki. She was wearing a dark swimsuit nicely decorated with frilly trim, but she was embarrassed to be seen in it. Especially by Koutarou. She covered herself with her arms and squatted down to try and curl herself into a tiny ball.

She’s awfully cute...

Seeing her like this, Koutarou couldn’t help thinking so. Not only did her swimsuit look good on her, but her being so shy about it only added to the charm.

“See, Satomi-kun? Isn’t she cute?”

“Yes. I think so.”

“You’re lying! This doesn’t suit me at all!”

“Why are you so embarrassed to wear a swimsuit you picked out yourself?”

“Buying it and wearing it are two different things!”

Maki was embarrassed to show off so much skin, and stayed crouched down in a tiny ball. She looked tearfully up at Koutarou and Shizuka. Koutarou looked down at her affectionately at first, but then he caught a glimpse of the darkness behind her teary eyes.

Ah, I see. Aika-san might..

Koutarou knew what that darkness might be. It was something that haunted her from her childhood. Knowing he couldn't let her continue to suffer like that, he decided to drag it out into the light.

“Aika-san, could it be that it's not the swimsuit you're embarrassed about, but your scar?”

Hearing those words, Maki's eyes shot wide open and her expression froze. She looked as though she'd seen into the gates of hell. She was even trembling. Seeing all this, Koutarou knew he'd been on the money.

“I thought so.”

Maki was born in the slums and had a rough life. She was sold to a slaver at a young age and grew up under constant abuse. Her master had saved her from that life only to train her as a soldier. Of course she was self-conscious about wearing something revealing—it would expose the scars of her past. Her claiming that the swimsuit didn't suit her and so on was all just an excuse. The truth was she didn't want anyone to see her scarred body. She would be disappointed if he saw it.

“D-Don't look, Satomi-kun. If you saw this, scarred body of mine, I'd...”

Small scars could be erased with magic. But there was nothing she could do about the larger, more serious ones—not to mention the scars in her heart. So she pleaded with Koutarou not to look at her.

“You worry about the strangest things, Aika-san.”

Koutarou squatted down in front of Maki and smiled at her.

“What...”

“Look at me.”

Koutarou grabbed the hem of his t-shirt and pulled it up over his head, revealing his upper body. His torso was decorated with all kinds of scars. Most of them were from his fierce battles in past Forthorthe, such as the burns he'd sustained in his fight with Alunaya or the cuts he'd taken from an assassin's blade. He hadn't altered any of his with magic, so his scars stood out far more than Maki's.

“Do you hate me after seeing these scars, Aika-san?”

“No, of course not! I love you just the way you are!”

Maki adamantly shook her head. Koutarou's scars had no effect on her opinion of him.

“I feel the same way. It doesn't matter to me if you have scars or

not.”

“Ah...”

Maki’s expression stiffened. Koutarou was the same as she was; there was a persuasive power behind his words. Maki’s senses told her he wasn’t lying, either. He genuinely wasn’t bothered by her scars. That gradually sank in, and as it did, the darkness left her eyes.

“So don’t hide it. So what if you have scars?”

“Satomi-kun, you’re a guy. You have no idea what a girl’s worries are like...”

“No, I don’t. That’s why it doesn’t bother me.”

“That’s... fair...”

Maki quietly nodded. Though nervous, she slowly stood up and let her arms hang down by her side instead of covering herself up.

“Now, where’s this scar?”

“Around here.”

“Ah, there it is! I see it now, but... I honestly wouldn’t have noticed if you hadn’t said anything.”

“What...?”

Maki went wide-eyed, but Koutarou shook his head.

“Normally, you don’t lean in and get a good look at girl’s stomach like this. Besides, that scar isn’t as obvious as you think it is.”

Even though they were at the beach, it was still bad manners to stare at a girl’s body. On top of that, Maki had used magic to erase most of her scars. Koutarou had to look closely to see anything, and all that remained of her largest wound was a fine red line.

“Haha, what did I tell you, Aika-san? Satomi-kun doesn’t care.”

Shizuka, of course, got a good laugh out of all this. It was just as she’d predicted. Maki was overly concerned about her scar for nothing. Koutarou didn’t mind it any bit whatsoever. Knowing that was how it would all go down, Shizuka found Maki’s reaction rather heartwarming.

“If you can erase them that well, you should take care of mine sometime.”

Koutarou smiled and put his t-shirt back on. His scars were serious enough that they would easily surprise anyone who saw them, so he kept them covered up. He wanted to keep Kenji and the others who didn’t know about his past from seeing them. Having them erased would be convenient.

“...Okay, I will.”

“Give me a discount, okay?”

“Since I’m now the treasurer of your band of knights, I won’t charge anything extra on top of my salary.”

“Thanks, that’s a big help.”

“Heehee...”

A smile finally returned to Maki's lips as she stood a little taller and stretched her back. She was returning to her usual self.

"Isn't that great, Aika-san?" Shizuka asked with a cheerful smile.

"Y-Yes," Maki nodded with tears of joy and relief in the corners of her eyes.

Watching the two of them interact, something dawned on Koutarou.

Landlord-san is always looking after everyone else...

Shizuka was always thinking of everyone else. She'd even noticed the darkness in Maki's heart and given her a hand—a push, even—to help her out. Koutarou admired that about her.

And Aika-san has gotten more and more expressive. She's smiling like a girl her age should be now...

Maki trusted Shizuka and had opened up to her. Koutarou was happy to see the once isolated Maki taking steps forward, however awkward she might be. She and Shizuka were good for each other. And, for their own unique reasons, Koutarou couldn't take his eyes off of either one of them.

"So, Satomi-kun, don't you have something else to say to Aika-san? Scar aside, she put a lot of thought into picking out this swimsuit."

"It's cute. It looks good on you, Aika-san."

"Aaauuugh..."

Hearing Koutarou compliment her, Maki shrunk back down into a ball again. She was embarrassed, but it was different from before. This time, she was genuinely concerned about Koutarou seeing her in a bathing suit. And this time, Shizuka and Koutarou were both smiling.

The next to arrive were Harumi and Clan. They were often together and today was no exception.

"Harumi, how does it feel walking on the sand?"

"It's a bit strange. It was very easy to walk, but it doesn't feel like I've come to the beach."

"Hmm, you can temporarily release the field around your hands for precise work, but I might need to include a function to do the same around your feet."

"I think that would be nice for a great many things, like playing the piano or dancing."

The two of them were performing daily experiments with Clan's invention, the PAF, which was a specialized barrier generation device that adjusted in real-time to assist its user. Since they were at the beach, they figured they might as well take the opportunity to run some tests in the water. Accordingly, they'd taken longer to get out on the beach than the other girls because they had extra preparations to

make.

“Hey, Clan, don’t waste all of your time at the beach doing a bunch of research.”

“I won’t! Once I’ve set up the machines to collect data, I’ll let Harumi play like normal.”

“I was talking about you too, you know. I know you love your research and all, but you should get some exercise every now and then. It’s unhealthy not to.”

“Fine...”

Clan was staring into a hologram projected from her bracelet, but she turned it off when Koutarou fussed at her. She knew he was right, but she still wanted to do her research and stole one last longing glance at her bracelet.

“Hahh... The poor citizens of Forthorthe are gonna end up with an unhealthy empress. How sad...”

“All right already! I get it! You’re always such a bully!”

Clan frowned and took off her bracelet. She was more upset about Koutarou picking on her than she was about not being able to get into the nitty-gritty of her research. But as she was griping, Harumi called out to her.

“Satomi-kun sure likes you, Clan-san.”

“I’m not happy about being liked by a bully!”

“But I love you, princess.”

“I’m going to kill you! End you! Destroy you once and for all!”

“Just make it quick, okay?”

“Th-This man is... Gaaah!”

Clan furiously stomped her foot in the sand as Koutarou continued to tease her. Knowing that it was an expression of affection, she had nothing to take her anger out on.

“You... If you weren’t the Blue Knight, I would’ve had you hanged ages ago!”

“Don’t lie. The way you are right now, you’d hesitate to kill even someone who was clearly an enemy.”

“You really are nothing but a bully!”

“Hmm...”

Having watched over the two of them for a while now, Harumi reached a certain conclusion. She then planted one foot firmly behind her and smiled.

“Take that!”

Raising her leg, she kicked up sand at Koutarou.

“What are you doing, Sakuraba-senpai?”

Koutarou looked at Harumi in utter bafflement. He couldn’t even begin to imagine why she would purposefully kick sand at him, so he figured it must have been an accident or she had a bug on her leg or

something.

“I’m envious because you never bully me, Satomi-kun. Now take that! And that!”

Contrary to what Koutarou had assumed, her primary objective was mischief. Harumi was a very modest girl by nature, but she had been influenced by the girls of room 106. On occasion, her playful side would shine through. This was one of those occasions, and she relentlessly continued to kick sand at Koutarou like a child.

“Envious, huh...?”

Koutarou flashed a wry smile. Harumi had said that she was envious, but she looked strangely happy right now. She certainly didn’t look like she was jealous. If anything, it looked like she was just using that as an excuse to be mischievous.

“That’s a great idea, Harumi! We should bury this man!”

Clan then joined in and began furiously kicking up sand, a sign of her discontent.

“I won’t lose!”

With a flame lit in his playful heart, Koutarou decided to go on the counteroffensive.

With Clan’s invention, there’s no need for me to worry about Sakuraba-senpai getting hurt. I can treat her like I would anyone else now, and that’s all thanks to you, Clan!

Koutarou always treated Harumi with extra care because he was worried about her health. But with Clan’s invention and Forthorthe’s advanced medical science, he didn’t need to hold back with her anymore. Clan had joined in the fray now too, and he didn’t feel so bad about fighting back when it was two on one. He thanked her from the bottom of his heart as he started kicking sand back at the girls.

“Hyaaaah!”

With Koutarou’s toned, trained legs, he could kick up way more sand at once than both girls combined.

“Eek!”

“Bwah?!”

Harumi yelped in glee as the shower of sand came raining down on them, but Clan looked stupefied. The PAF protected Harumi from most of it, but Clan was completely swamped.

“Ah, uh... Sorry, Clan.”

Seeing her covered in sand, Koutarou felt a little bad and began brushing her off. As he did, he felt a cold gaze piercing into him.

“Veltlion, just what is a princess of Forthorthe to you?”

“Hmm... Maybe a good playmate?”

“Then take better care of me.”

“I thought I was, though.”

“I wonder about that...”

Clan's face turned red as she allowed Koutarou to brush her off. Whether it was red from anger or embarrassment remained a mystery, even to Clan herself.

"Heehee, but he *is* taking care of you now."

But feeling much the same way herself, Harumi knew she was blushing.

Kenji had been out buying more ice to put in the cooler. He'd been chosen for the job after losing a rock-paper-scissors duel to Koutarou, and the five members of the cosclub had decided to go with him. Since they'd all brought cosplay outfits with them to the beach, they hadn't packed much in the way of food or drinks and wanted to get some while they were out.

"Heh, that's what you get for acting so cool, Mackenzie."

"Shut it. How could I refuse when the girls asked me to carry their stuff too?"

"Always the gentleman, of course. Anyways, drink this and rest up."

"Ah, thanks."

After finally making it back to the beach, Kenji was lying spread out under one of the umbrellas. Since he'd ended up carrying the cosclub girls' food and drinks in addition to the ice, he was pretty wiped out. He'd laid down to take a break, and happily took a drink from the water bottle Koutarou offered him. The cosclub girls were already off playing with the girls from room 106, leaving the boys behind at the umbrellas.

"I'm gonna go catch up with everyone else. You should come out too once you've recovered."

"...That's unusual, Kou."

Koutarou was about to get up and leave, but he stopped when he heard what Kenji said. There was something serious behind those words. When he turned back to look, Kenji had propped himself up and was looking back at him.

"You actually getting along with others is, well... I never thought I'd see the day."

"Mackenzie..."

"You used to push others away when you started to get too close to them. And you certainly never would have agreed to go to the beach with anybody."

"That... might be true."

Koutarou nodded. It was true. He almost hadn't come to the beach last year with everyone. Kenji took another sip of water to refresh himself and stared at Koutarou.

"So, Kou, what happened between you and those girls?"

“That’s...”

Kenji usually wore a gentle, smug smile—but not right now. He was staring straight at Koutarou with a serious look on his face. Kenji knew Koutarou better than anyone. Since half-assed excuses wouldn’t work on him, Koutarou would have to tell him part of the truth.

“Since this involves their personal lives, I can’t go into the details, but... something like what happened between you and I happened between me and them.”

“I see, so that’s why...”

There, Kenji finally smiled and nodded. Koutarou’s short explanation was enough for him. He knew what it meant. He and Koutarou had only come to an understanding with each other after butting heads and clashing several times. So if Koutarou said he’d gotten to know the girls the same way, something similar must have happened between them. While he didn’t know the details, he got the gist of it.

“That’s too bad. I had my eye on one of them, but if something like that happened, then I guess I’d better give up.”

Kenji returned to his usual self as he smiled at the girls in the distance.

“If you’re serious, I don’t mind. I like them, but... it’s not like I’m going out with them. Besides, I have nothing to worry about if you’re actually serious.”

However, Koutarou still had a rather somber look on his face. He’d sworn to make sure the invaders were happy. If possible, he wanted to make that happen on his own, but he realized that would be difficult. Koutarou wasn’t that selfish, nor was he that much of an idealist.

Moreover, if there was something important that he couldn’t do himself, relying on Kenji would be ideal. To Koutarou, Kenji was just as special as the girls of room 106. Kenji was the first to ever reach a hand out to him—the first to save him. In a way, Koutarou trusted him more than he did himself. At least, he did when Kenji was being serious.

“And if I wasn’t serious?”

“I’d beat the crap out of you.”

“Wow, you didn’t miss a beat on that one, Kou. You actually scare me, so I’ll hang back until you make your decision.”

“Mackenzie...”

“Kou, don’t get scared and run away now, okay? Keep moving forward.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Good.”

Kenji took another sip of water and laid back down under the

umbrella. After having such a direct talk with Koutarou, he was a bit embarrassed and was quick to make an exit from the conversation.

“I’m off, then.”

“Yeah, I’ll see you later.”

The same was true for Koutarou, who turned away and headed over to the girls. But this was only temporary. The next time they spoke, things would be all back to normal again.

Koutarou and the girls all went for the water first thing, but after taking a dip, they split up and began enjoying the beach in their own ways. There were sixteen of them (eighteen with the haniwas), and plenty of things to do.

“Clan, you seem out of breath. Are you okay?”

“I-I’m fine! I can’t admit defeat yet!”

“Satomi-kun, I’ll pick up the slack for Clan-san.”

“I’m counting on you, Sakuraba-senpai.”

Koutarou was in the middle of a game of beach volleyball. There were three people on each team, and the first team to ten points would be declared the winner. As for his team, Koutarou had Clan and Harumi on his side. Since Clan wanted to monitor how the PAF was working, she’d ended up on Harumi’s team by default. However, since Harumi had a weak constitution and Clan was wildly out of shape due to a serious lack of exercise, Koutarou was added to their team to help balance things out.

“I thought you’d give up about now, Kou.”

“They’re doing better than I thought they would.”

“Yeah, Sakuraba-senpai can really hop to it when she’s feeling good.”

The opposing team consisted of Kenji, Theia, and Shizuka. In terms of athleticism, Kenji was about on par with Koutarou, but the two girls on his team were also both extremely athletic. They appeared to have an overwhelming advantage, but it surprisingly wasn’t a completely one-sided game. And that was thanks to Harumi. The PAF more than made up for her handicap, so she made a good partner for Koutarou. Most of the points they’d earned were from a combo attack with the two of them.

“Here I go, Mackenzie!”

“Bring it! It’s about time we end this!”

“Then...”

Koutarou threw the ball up into the air.

“...You’re going down!”

He then pulled off a daring jump serve. Because the ball was so big and soft, it didn’t pick up all that much speed as it sailed to the other side of the net. Since it was falling towards her, Theia moved to

intercept it.

“Mackenzie!”

She used her whole body to kill the ball’s momentum and pass it to Kenji.

“Got it! Here we go, Kasagi-san!”

Kenji received the ball and passed it forward. Though in a slightly different way, he was just about as athletic as Koutarou, and the ball traced a beautiful arc in the air as it fell towards the net.

“Leave it to me, Mackenzie-kun!”

Shizuka rushed up to the ball. She chased after it with her eyes as she kicked off of the sand. Reaching the apex of her jump, she smashed the falling ball with all of her might. As strong as she was, she hit it as hard as either of the boys could. The lithe and petite Theia would receive incoming balls, Kenji would dexterously set them up, and the mighty Shizuka would spike them. That was their winning attack pattern so far.

“Not so fast!”

But this time, Koutarou jumped up on the other side of the net in an attempt to block the ball. His timing was spot on, but because Shizuka had changed the direction of the ball every so slightly when she spiked it, he only caught it with his forearm. Thanks to the imperfect block, however, the ball lost a lot of its momentum and slowly fell down in front of Clan.

“Wah, ooohh!”

Clan’s legs were getting numb from exhaustion, and it was all she could do to just barely hit the ball and keep it in play. Her awkward shot sent it flying to a part of the court no one was occupying, but Harumi quickly moved into position.

“Satomi-kun!”

With the PAF’s assistance, Harumi could move much faster than the average girl. Thanks to that, she was able to get a hit in as she slid across the sand.

“Make iiit!”

Koutarou had just recovered from blocking Shizuka’s spike, and the ball was now flying right for him. He didn’t have any time to think, much less set himself up. Just reaching out towards the flying ball was all he could manage. His hand just barely made contact with it, changing its direction and returning it to Kenji’s side in the form of a quick attack.

“Not going to happen!”



Theia lowered her posture and thrust herself towards the ball. Having decided that she wouldn't make it by running, she threw herself forward with arms outstretched, sliding through the sand. But it wasn't quite enough; her small stature worked against her. She was about a fist's length away from it when the ball hit the sand. It then bounced up and landed once more before rolling away.

"All right!"

"We did it?!"

"We did! We've closed the gap by one point, Clan-san!"

Seeing the ball rolling along the sand, Koutarou's team erupted into joyful cheers. While it was partially thanks to dumb luck, they'd still scored while at a disadvantage. It was indeed cause for celebration.

"Hmph! You're pretty good, Koutarou!"

Theia threw a frustrated fist into the sand before getting up and brushing herself off. She'd intended on winning without letting them get any more points, so this was a mortifying turn of events. She'd matured enough that she was no longer totally obsessed with winning, but she still always tried her best when it came to games. She was currently rather fired up, but she wasn't the only one.

"We won't lose that easily. Clan and Sakuraba-senpai are different from before."

"Let's do our best, Clan-san."

"I guess I have to... I'll come up with a plan."

While the opposing team had the lead, Koutarou's team also had no intention of losing. Koutarou, Clan, and Harumi were trying their hardest to win the match. The odds weren't in their favor and it wasn't like there was a prize on the line, but they were all having fun. It was precious time spent together with friends like this that made summer truly special.

Ultimately, the beach volleyball match ended in defeat for Koutarou's team. Just after they scored their eighth point, Kenji's team bagged their tenth and stole the win. But since Koutarou, Clan, and Harumi had been a whole five points behind earlier in the game, it was a considerable feat that they were able to catch up by such a margin.

"That was a close game."

"What a shame."

"This is a disgrace."

Koutarou and his teammates were now sitting down near the volleyball court. Though they'd put up a good fight, their shoulders were still slumped in defeat as they watched Kenji's team play their

next match. Since the winners stayed on for another round, they were now facing off against the cosclub. To make up for the difference in ability, all five of them were on the court together at the same time. Yet even so, Kenji's team had the upper hand.

"Clan, I hope you learn from this and start getting a little more exercise."

"That's not going to happen. I'm too busy with research."

"I really do feel terrible for the citizens of Forthorthe. Their empress will be—"

"Don't bring that up again!"

"Clan-san, why don't we exercise together? I think it would be easy for both of us to build up our strength and stamina with this... um, the PAF."

"If that's what you want, then fine... I'll go along with you."

"Good. Now... Hup!"

After settling things with Clan and Harumi, Koutarou got up with a shout. The girls looked up at him with perplexed expressions.

"What's the matter?"

"Don't you remember? Mackenzie and I had a running bet that the loser would go buy drinks."

"Oh yeah, I do recall you saying something about that."

Before the match, Koutarou and Kenji had a little wager. The captain of the losing team would have to go buy drinks for the winning team. And, after losing, Koutarou was about to make good on his end of the deal.

"Considering how he's faring now, he might have already forgotten about it."

"Maybe. But where's the fun in that?"

"How honest..."

"I'm shocked to hear you say that," Koutarou said with a wry smile and a shrug.

"What?"

"Clan-san, Satomi-kun is a knight, after all."

Clan hadn't understood what Koutarou meant at first, but Harumi filled her in. When she did, Clan realized her own shortcomings and sighed.

"Hahh... Then you better hurry up and fulfill your promise, Layous Fatra Veltlion."

"As you wish, my princess."

Koutarou somewhat jokingly saluted Clan and Harumi before leaving them behind and heading out to find a beach shop.

Leaving the volleyball court and walking down the beach towards the shops, Koutarou spied the other girls that weren't playing

volleyball. The first he laid eyes on were Sanae and Maki, who were still in the ocean swimming together.

“Maki, you said this was your first time coming to the beach. I’m surprised you can actually swim.”

“Ah, that’s thanks to these two.”

“Me, Karama, ho!”

“And me, Korama, ho!”

“What do they have to do with anything?”

“We’re supporting her underwater, ho”

“With jet propulsion, ho!”

“That sounds fun! Hey, Maki, let me borrow at least Karama-chan!”

“Sure. I’m starting to get used to the water, so I think I’ll be fine with one of them.”

“Karama, let’s have a showdown, ho!”

“I accept, ho!”

“All right, then let’s race to that island!”

“Let’s go, ho!”

“Maximum power, ho!”

“Wawawah! Y-You’re way too fast!”

Sanae and Maki each used a haniwa like a tiny underwater jetpack to swim at superhuman speeds. They were in the water just past Koutarou at first, but they shot off towards the horizon in the blink of an eye. They were so far away now they looked like ants. Koutarou was worried at first, but upon recalling they were a former ghost and evil magical girl, he realized they would be just fine.

“You’re fine now, Ruth.”

“Really, Kiriha-sama?”

“Yes. The problem is Yurika.”

“Ptooeey... Ptooeey... Kiriha-san, I get water in my mouth every time I open it!”

“Then only open it when your head’s above water.”

“But that’s hard!”

The other three girls—Kiriha, Ruth, and Yurika—were in the middle of their swimming lessons. Kiriha was acting as an instructor for the other two. The serious and earnest Ruth was already getting a hang of it, but things weren’t working out for Yurika at all. She was basically just flailing her arms and legs in the water. It looked like she wouldn’t be swimming on her own any time soon.

“It might be better if you could see how you look when you swim.”

“Then I’ll record it.”

“Whaaat?! You don’t have to do that. I’m swimming properly!

See?"

"I'm suggesting this because you're not. If you would, Ruth."

Kiriha focused all of her attention on Yurika for the time being while Ruth operated a small unmanned craft to record Yurika's so-called swimming. She was oblivious to how awkwardly she moved in the water, and Kiriha knew the first step to getting help was admitting you had a problem.

Good, everyone seems to be having fun.

Seeing the girls having a good time made Koutarou happy. He felt better knowing that, despite shouldering so many hardships, they could at least spend some peaceful time together right now.

All that's left is for me to have fun too...

With nothing else to worry about, Koutarou figured that he should enjoy himself too. The girls worried for him much the same way he did for them. And if he didn't seem like he was having fun, they'd definitely worry. So he decided to enjoy his time at the beach, for the girls' sake just as much as his own.

The beach hut Koutarou stopped at to buy drinks was brand new, but had an old-fashioned design. It was quite charming, and filled to the brim with all kinds of merchandise, making it an especially popular shopping hotspot for women at the beach.

"Welcome to the beach hut!"

"Come on in. What can we help you find today?"

"Y-You guys?!"

"Oh, you're Kiriha-neesan's friend!"

"It's been a while, Koutarou-kun."

The two men that greeted Koutarou when he entered the store were the ghost hunters he'd met several times before. They'd started off as enemies, but they were a huge help during Sanae's crisis. Koutarou had also heard they'd played a part in handling things with the underground. And after all that, Koutarou no longer felt any hostility towards them.

"What are you guys doing here?"

"Business! We're going to make a fortune off this beach hut!"

Apparently, the two ghost hunters had started up a beach hut business using the funds they'd gotten from Kiriha. Whenever they didn't have a mission from Kiriha, they worked as ghost hunters. But it wasn't like they always had leads on evil spirits, either. And whenever they found themselves without work, their income would stagnate and they'd begin worrying about their future. That was why they'd turned their attention to a beach hut. They'd set up shop on a popular beach where they could sell their products at a high margin. They needed to earn enough during the summer to keep them going

during the off-season.

“Don’t mark things up too much, okay?”

“We know. We’ve got it all planned out.”

“We don’t want any trouble. This shop also doubles as a training place for the People of the Earth.”

“Training place? What do you mean?”

“Why don’t you take a look around you?”

“Wait, are they all underground dwellers?!”

The beach hut had several employees, many of which were wearing what looked like traditional Japanese clothing—the costume of the People of the Earth.

“That’s right. The underground dwellers receive vocational training before they’re deployed to the surface on their own.”

“And this is just one facility where they can get it. We needed extra help, and they needed training. It’s win-win for everyone.”

“Hmm... Looks like you’ve put a lot of thought into this.”

A seasonal business like a beach hut didn’t get a lot of regular customers. Most of their patrons would only be there once or twice a summer. That made it a good training environment for the People of the Earth. Even if they made mistakes here and there, it wouldn’t seriously affect the shop’s reputation. Moreover, the hunters’ mansion was nearby, which basically doubled as a dorm for their employees. In that sense, it really was an optimal training facility.

“And just so you know, everyone at the shop’s gonna be acting as ghosts during your test of courage tonight.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it was a direct request from Nee-san herself.”

“Aniki, are you sure we should be telling him that?”

“If we don’t, those extreme girls might make real ghosts out of us. This is Kiriha-neesan we’re talking about. She probably won’t say anything herself.”

“Yeah, I hadn’t heard anything about this.”

“Thought so... Well, I’m glad we bumped into each other here then. Things coulda gotten dangerous.”

The older hunter shrugged, and Koutarou smiled wryly.

“I’ll try to let them know not to use weapons or something else.”

“That’d be a great help! As thanks, I’ll throw in a little bonus on the house!”

“So you’ll give me a discount?”

“I can’t do that, but you can take some of this unsold merchandise with you.”

“Thanks. We’ve got a big group with us today, so I’d be much obliged.”

After getting some drinks and his freebies, Koutarou took another

look around the shop. The People of the Earth were already making steady progress in their invasion. Kiriha's wish had started taking shape. With the People of the Earth working so hard right here in the shop, Koutarou could see it. He was also proud to see that this was what they'd all fought to protect.

After eating dinner that evening, Koutarou and the others headed out to hold a test of courage they'd planned. It would start in the inn's backyard, and from there, they'd climb a mountain path to reach an old, Western-style mansion. The locals all claimed the place was haunted, making it the perfect spot for a test of courage.

"One of those ghosts is already with us, though."

"But that ghost isn't scary at all since Koutarou brought her with him, heehee!"

The old mansion in question was the same one where the ghost hunters had held Sanae captive last summer. They were currently using it as a dorm for their employees at the beach hut, but there had been ghosts there without a doubt. It was a genuine haunted house.

"Hmm, maybe I should be on the side scaring people."

"No way. It'd just be a hassle later on."

Though they were participating, neither Koutarou nor Sanae were scared of ghosts. Koutarou already knew what was going to happen during the test of courage, and Sanae had once been a ghost herself. To the two of them, it felt more like they were going on a casual hike.

"By the way, Ruth, what is a test of courage?"

"I'm not very well informed myself, Your Highness, but it's supposedly a game to prove your courage by heading into territory that ghosts inhabit."

"Oh... In other words, it's kind of like a small-scale version of my trial."

"Most likely."

Theia and Ruth weren't particularly afraid of ghosts either. They'd spent plenty of time with Sanae in her otherworldly form, and they had a certain resistance to unusual phenomena being aliens that had travelled across the stars.

"I don't want to test my courage!"

"It's okay, Yurika-san. I've prepared this shrine maiden cosplay just for the occasion."

"That's right! It's the president's masterpiece!"

"Real ghosts aren't scared of cosplayers!"

"Oh, it'll be fine!"

"Nooooo!"

Unlike the first four, Yurika was terrified. She was so scared of ghosts that she hadn't even wanted to come in the first place. If the

five members of the cosclub hadn't caught her, she would've bailed and run off somewhere.

"Aika-san, is it difficult to defeat ghosts?"

"That depends on the ghost. Even I could easily take care of normal wandering or bound spirits. But when it comes to divine-level spirits like Sanae-san, it would take a magician specialized in spiritual magic armed with prepared rituals to even stand a chance."

"Hmm... I wonder if Uncle's powers would be enough."

"If you don't mind getting a little heavier for a while, I should be able to deal with anything shy of a divine-level spirit."

"Absolutely not."

"I just thought I'd offer..."

If a real ghost appeared, Shizuka and Maki were thinking of exorcising it. Shizuka could use the Fire Dragon Emperor's spiritual energy and mana, and Maki had her own magic powers. No normal ghost was a match for them, so they had nothing to be afraid of themselves.

"Clan-san, what do you think of ghosts?"

"In the past I thought of them as unscientific, but as of late, I've begun thinking they might be an interesting area of research."

Harumi and Clan were both somewhat neutral on the subject. They weren't afraid, but they had no intention of doing anything like exorcising them. With Alaia's memories, Harumi wasn't bothered by the idea of the supernatural, but her gentle personality kept her from wanting to disturb the spirits of the dead. Clan, on the other hand, thought of ghosts as potential research subjects, but was aware of the potential risks involved. The most she wanted to do was capture a ghost for further study.

"Kurano-san, everyone seems to be having fun."

"Heh, I told you that girls had a greater tolerance for things like this."

Apart from Yurika and some of the cosclub members, nobody was really scared apart from Kenji. He looked like he was a cool and stoic guy, but in truth, he didn't do well with anything involving ghosts or the occult. Kiriha, who was smiling at him, made use of spiritual energy technology and knew quite well that ghosts were very real. That being said, she wasn't afraid of them.

"I hate creepy stuff like this..."

"Well, it has always been said that women are more in touch with the supernatural. Now then..."

Kiriha smiled at Kenji once more before stepping in front of the group with a small box in her hands. She would be leading the test of courage.

“It’s about time we split into teams. Everyone, please draw a lot from this box.”

Following Kiriha’s instructions, Koutarou and the others each drew their lots one at a time. There were sixteen people in total, and they’d be splitting into five groups of three for the test. That left one person out, but Kiriha wasn’t exactly participating. Since she was in charge of the event, she was acting more like a chaperone and supervisor.

“I’m... Oh, I’m with Sakuraba-senpai and Clan.”

Kiriha had arranged the lottery so that Clan and Harumi would be in the same team. Since there were still concerns about Harumi’s health, Kiriha thought it would be best if they were in the same team in case anything went wrong with the PAF. They were excluded from the lottery themselves, and would just be waiting to find out who their third member was. As such, only thirteen of the sixteen people were actually drawing lots, and Koutarou had pulled the one that read “Clan and Harumi’s team” rather than a number.

“Welcome, Satomi-kun.”

“I can’t say the same, Veltlion.”

“Oh my.”

Harumi welcomed Koutarou with a smile but Clan turned away from him. She was still mad about what had happened earlier.

“Satomi-kun, this is because you tease her too much.”

“I can’t help it. When it comes to Clan, I just let my guard down and end up saying too much.”

“Then I think you should apologize to her.”

“I will... Hey, Clan.”

“What?”

Clan finally turned to look Koutarou. She shot a cold glance at him through her antique glasses.

“I’m sorry about before.”

“Have you thought about what you did?”

“Yeah... But I gotta admit, this is pretty hard.”

“What is?”

“You get mad at me if I’m too rough with you, but you also get mad if I treat you like a princess.”

“W-We’ve known each other for a long time! Learn how much you need to hold back already!”

“I’m trying. So at least forgive me if I mess up once in a while.”

“...F-Fine, I guess I have no choice...”

Clan wanted Koutarou to recognize her as the princess she was, but she also wanted him to acknowledge her as his partner and not treat her like one. In other words, she wanted him to tread a fine line—one that sometimes didn’t match up with Koutarou’s perceptions.

She knew her demands were a bit unreasonable, so she decided to relent and forgive him.

“Satomi-kun, if you want to play rough with someone, you can do it with me.”

Harumi accurately understood the subtleties of Koutarou’s emotions. He only ever horsed around with and teased the people he liked. Kenji’s suffering was proof enough of that. And that was why Harumi was a bit jealous of Clan.

“Um... then I’ll start with this.”

Koutarou lightly flicked Harumi’s forehead. Thanks to Clan’s invention, he no longer needed to treat Harumi with extra care. That being said, she was still an upperclassman who should be treated with respect. So he compromised and just gave her a love tap.

“Ow... Heehee.”

Harumi pressed her hands against her slightly reddened forehead and smiled happily. Her ultimate goal was to be as physically close with Koutarou as Theia and Yurika, but she knew how mindful Koutarou was of her health and fragile body. This was a satisfactory development for now.

“You sure are eccentric too, Harumi...”

Clan let out a sigh, but Harumi responded by smiling at her.

“Clan-san, you just said ‘too,’ didn’t you?”

“Th-That was just a slip of the tongue! I didn’t mean anything by it!”

“We’ll leave it at that, then.”

In the end, Clan’s face once again turned beet red as she turned away from Harumi and Koutarou.

Most of the girls in the group had advanced technology or other extraordinary powers at their disposal. Using those would make the test of courage boring, so Koutarou had forbidden them as a ground rule. This was also in part to protect the hunters and their employees who would be acting as ghosts, but Koutarou strategically left that bit out.

The first team—Sanae, Yurika, and the cosclub president—set out at 8PM sharp.

“Nooooo! I don’t want to take a test of courage with a former ghost and a fake shrine maiden! Anything but thaaat!”

“My, Yurika-chan, you’re awfully spirited today.”

“Yurika can be really useless sometimes, but she always sticks it out when she’s got a job to do.”

“No, today is one of my useless days! You can leave me out! Just leave me here! Save meee, Satomi-saaaaan!”

Her two team members had to drag Yurika along kicking and screaming when they left. A few minutes after they set off, however,

her screams could no longer be heard. Those left at the starting line weren't sure if that was because they'd just faded into the distance, or if Yurika had just plain fainted. Not that anyone cared too much one way or another.

But now that everything was quiet, the second team set out.

"I just hope we come across ghosts that we can defeat with martial arts."

"I've heard that when using martial arts against spirits, a clear intent to attack is more important than power."

"Hmm... I guess I'll have to try it."

"I don't think that'll be necessary. Let's finish this without a fuss."

The second team consisted of Theia and Maki who were both lacking in Japanese common sense, and Kenji. He was trying to hold his own, but being terrified over the prospect of ghosts, he wasn't doing a great job. Whether he would be able to keep the two willful girls from doing anything reckless was questionable.

Koutarou, Harumi, and Clan were the third team to set out. Because Theia and the others weren't as noisy as the team before them, they didn't have to wait long before their turn to leave. Clan and Harumi were in the lead with Koutarou behind them.

"Veltlion, wouldn't it be more knightly for you to be in the front?"

Clan wasn't at all happy with the current arrangement. As both a princess and a woman, she felt like Koutarou should be the vanguard.

"That might be proper manners, but then things would be boring for you guys, right?"

"Why?"

"Because I can sense presences to a certain degree."

Koutarou was bringing up the rear for a reason. Because of spiritual circuitry Sanae had created in him, he was somewhat attuned to spiritual energy and could sense nearby presences. Even though he tried, Sanae's power was so strong that he couldn't turn it completely off. So instead, he had the girls walking in front of him so they couldn't see his reactions. That way, they'd still be in for a few surprises.

"Fine..."

Hearing Koutarou's explanation, Clan relented. Realizing he was acting out of consideration, she had nothing left to object to.

"Clan-san, the two of us should work together."

"You're right. This is a rare opportunity. Let's make the most of it."

"Indeed."

With Harumi and Clan out in front, the second team left the inn's backyard and began climbing up the mountain path.

Koutarou had rushed up the same mountain path last summer to save Sanae, but his trip this time was much more leisurely. His teammates, Harumi and Clan, were just casually chatting away as they walked ahead of him. Without anyone to save or defeat, things seemed calm and peaceful.

“Damn, I got bit by a mosquito.”

“That’s because you didn’t put on any insect repellent.”

“Oh, I have some ointment for insect bites.”

“Thank you very much, Sakuraba-senpai.”

Since no one in the group was afraid of ghosts, it looked like they were simply taking a cheerful stroll on a summer night.

“Wow, this ointment feels nice and cool.”

“Doesn’t it? It’s been my favorite for years now.”

“Veltlion, turn this way please.”

“Sure.”

Clan sprayed Koutarou.

“Now this way.”

“Sure.”

She then sprayed him again.

“All right.”

“Thank you, Clan.”

“Be more careful in the future, please. Men are already careless enough as it is when it comes to this kind of thing.”

“Okay.”

“Clan-san, you could just always do it for him.”

“No thank you! I am not a servant!”

Clan blushed and loudly refused before turning away. Harumi then leaned in and whispered quietly in her ear.

“If you’re too stubborn, you’ll lose out.”

“I-I’m not being... stubborn...”

“I used to hold back too, and I suffered for it. That’s how I know.”

“Harumi...”

Clan took Harumi’s words to heart and thought to herself for a moment before clearing her throat and turning back to Koutarou. Harumi watched this all unfold with a smile.

“Ahem... Th-That said, since you probably won’t remember, let me know right away if you forget.”

“What’s this, Clan? You’re being awfully nice today.”

“You didn’t have to add ‘today’!”

“I know. It was just embarrassing to compliment you so honestly.”

“You two-faced sourpuss! One day I’ll have you bow before me and force you to say that you lo—”

Clan was getting rather heated and was about to make a bold

declaration when she got interrupted.

“Ooooooh!”

“A cuuurse upon you! Oooh!”

Two ghosts—a small, plump one and a tall, skinny one—jumped out from the bushes nearby. They had their arms raised in the air to make them look bigger and scarier, and swaggered over towards Koutarou and the girls.

“Kyaaaaah!”

Clan’s immediate response was a rather loud scream. It wasn’t because they were ghosts, however, but because they’d jumped out at her while she was in the middle of shouting at Koutarou. She was simply startled.

“This time was a success!”

“All right!”

Familiar voices could be heard from underneath the ghosts’ masks. Since he’d spoken with them just earlier that day, Koutarou realized the two ghosts were actually the two ghost hunters. Seeing the knowing look Koutarou gave them, the two ghosts gave a little wave as they returned to the bushes. They still had two more groups to scare.

“Clan-san, they’re gone now.”

“Wh-Wh-What on earth was that?!”

“They were ghosts for the test of courage. And they got you good.”

“I-It’s not like I was scared! It was just so sudden that it surprised me...”

“I know.”

“That’s good... Phew...”

Clan had been so startled that her heart was still racing. She took a deep breath and tried to relax.

“By the way, Clan...”

“What?”

“Would you like to walk yourself, or would you prefer to keep going like this?”

“What...?”

It was only then that Clan fully realized the position she was in. In her surprise, she’d jumped straight into Koutarou’s arms.

“I-I’ll walk! I’ll walk on my own, thank you very much!”

Clan hurriedly got down and began awkwardly walking away. It was obvious that she was quite shaken up.

“Oh Clan-san... Heehee...”

It was far too amusing a sight, and Harumi couldn’t help giggling as she followed after her.

After encountering the ghost hunters, Koutarou and the girls would run into more ghosts every few minutes. These ghosts, however, were all People of the Earth. They were harmless, and knowing that there was no danger, the atmosphere shifted towards enjoying their sudden appearances.

“Satomi-kun, don’t you think behind that corner is suspicious?”

“No comment.”

“Oh, that’s right. You can tell.”

“If you know, then tell me, Veltlion. It’s so irritating being surprised time and time again...”

“Not gonna happen. That’s the whole point of the test of courage.”

“Why don’t you hang further back, Clan-san?”

“I don’t want to do that either!”

Clan was in a foul mood after being startled several times over now, but Koutarou and Harumi were both having fun. Harumi’s eyes sparkled as she tried to anticipate when and where the next ghost would appear, and Koutarou was enjoying both her and Clan’s reactions.

“Jeez, what do Earthlings find so fun about this...?” Clan muttered to herself sourly.

She was having a hard time understanding the culture of this strange planet. Overhearing her, Harumi smiled.

“There are two main things, I think.”

“What are they?”

“The first is just having the chance to do something unusual. When you have an everyday routine, sometimes it’s fun to add a little spice.”

Going to school and studying day in and day out would make anyone want to have a little fun. A test of courage was just one way to get that in every now and then.

“I see.”

“That said, I don’t think that really applies in our case since out-of-the-ordinary things are happening to us all the time.”

“Ahaha, that’s true.”

When it came to Koutarou and the girls of room 106, their everyday lives weren’t always so everyday. They’d found themselves in all kinds of situations. Though it meant fighting every now and then, most of it was fun. There was no lack of spice in their lives, to be sure.

“So, what’s the second thing?”

“That’s... It’s similar to the first, but this gives you the chance to see your friends in a light you don’t normally.”

“In a light you don’t normally...?”

Clan looked rather puzzled. Having had very few friends before

coming to 106, what Harumi was saying didn't quite make sense to her.

"Like how you're a timid person who hates being surprised," Koutarou explained. "Or, conversely, how Sakuraba-senpai is a bit of an oddball who likes being scared."

"I see..."

"What, exactly, is 'oddball' supposed to mean, Satomi-kun?"

Koutarou chiming in had helped Clan understand, but now Harumi had her cheeks puffed out in dissatisfaction. She wasn't thrilled about Koutarou calling her an oddball.

"I was only exaggerating to make a point."

"Really?"

"Really. You're awfully persistent today, Sakuraba-senpai."

"I felt since we're doing a test of courage, I should show you my bad side too. I want you to see 'Sakuraba Harumi' and not just the normal 'Sakuraba-senpai.'"

"If that's your bad side, it's an awfully cute one."

"I am a girl, after all. Heehee..."

Thanks to Clan's invention, the PAF, Harumi was able to overcome her physical disadvantages. She was also feeling especially free-spirited since they were on vacation. Like she said, she was showing off a rare side of herself.

"In Harumi's case, even if she tries to show off her bad side, she's—"

Suddenly, in the middle of her sentence, Clan vanished and Koutarou and Harumi could hear a rumbling sound.

"Kyaaaaah!"

Clan had been walking along the edge of the path, which had apparently given way beneath her. Just enough of the earth crumbled away that she lost her footing and went sliding down the hill below.

"Clan-san!"

"Clan?! Damn it!"

Koutarou summoned all of his spiritual energy and jumped right after her without hesitation. He ran speeding down the slope with all of his might to try and catch up with her. A stunt like that would ordinarily be incredibly dangerous, but with his physical abilities strengthened by spiritual energy, it was manageable for Koutarou.

"Kyaaaaah!"

"There she is!"

Following the sound of her screams, Koutarou pinpointed Clan's aura on the dark hillside. There was underbrush everywhere, but it didn't seem to be doing anything to stop her momentum. She just kept sliding down the hill at an alarming rate. Since she'd intentionally left behind all her equipment for the sake of the test of courage, there

wasn't anything she could do for herself either.

"Not good! There's a cliff up ahead!"

If Clan continued sliding like she was, she'd go straight over the edge. And with nothing to protect her, there would be no chance of her surviving the fall. Knowing that, Koutarou ignored any possible danger to himself and picked up the pace, sprinting towards her with all his might.

"Clan!"

"Veltlion?!"

Luckily, Koutarou was able to grab her hand. But that was where things really got difficult. Now Koutarou and Clan both had to stop before they fell off the cliff. They were collectively moving at an incredible speed, and they'd have to find some way to stop before it was too late. And time was running out. The edge was just up ahead.

"Raaaah!"

With Clan's right hand in his right, Koutarou reached out and grabbed hold of a tree branch with his left. Unfortunately, it was far too thin to support them and snapped right in half. Their last hope had failed them, sending them flying over the cliff.

"Nooooo!"

"Not good!"

Koutarou and Clan plummeted into the rocky valley below. It was all too clear what would happen to them when they hit the bottom.

At this rate, we're both going to die!

Coming to that realization, Koutarou pulled Clan close and firmly embraced her. He was going to do his best to cushion her fall with his own body.

"No! If you do that, you'll—"

"If I don't, we both will!"

The way Koutarou saw it, he had three options: they could do nothing and fall together, he could try and protect Clan, or he could use Clan to protect himself. The one with the highest probability of survival was Koutarou protecting Clan. Not doing anything was out of the question, and so was using Clan to protect himself. So by process of elimination, the only answer was protecting Clan. But even if it hadn't been the logical choice, it would have been what Koutarou had chosen anyway. He didn't have it in him to quietly let someone he loved die.

"Let me go, Veltlion! If we're going to die, we should die together!"

"Who'd listen to you, idiot?!"

"Veltlion!"

Clan tried to escape from Koutarou's arms, but she was no match for his strength. A knight should never abandon his princess,

especially not in her hour of need. He was more than prepared to die to protect Clan.

“Satomi-kun!”

However, Koutarou and Clan would never reach the rocky bottom of the valley. Harumi had removed the limiter on her PAF and came flying down to save them.

Clan’s invention, the PAF, replicated the functions of Koutarou’s armor, which of course included the ability to fly. What was truly unique about the PAF was that it could transform its barrier in real-time. However, since the barrier was doing what the mechanical parts of a powered suit of armor normally would, using it was a constant drain on the battery. It wasn’t an issue with normal usage, but there were limiters in place to keep her from doing anything that might be too draining—like flying. Harumi had removed those limiters in order to save Koutarou and Clan.

“I’m glad the battery held out for us.”

Harumi gently set Koutarou and Clan down at the bottom of the valley and patted the small box attached to her waist. As she did, the alarm that had been ringing all this time finally fell silent and the barrier covering her body vanished. The PAF’s battery had been completely drained by her daring rescue.

“You saved us, Sakuraba-senpai.”

“I’m glad you’re okay.”

“You have my thanks, Harumi. I am in your debt now.”

“Your debt? But you’re the one who invented this device, Clan-san.”

“Then I’ll be sure to present you with a new and improved device one day.”

“That sounds wonderful. I’m looking forward to it.”

Thanks to Harumi’s quick thinking, Koutarou and Clan had narrowly escaped certain death. Having scraped by with their lives, they were deeply relieved. They both sighed in relief as they thanked Harumi.

“Hahh... Still, that was a close one...”

“Yeah... Actually, Clan, are you okay? You rolled down that hill a good long ways.”

“I’d like to say I’m fine, but it seems I’ve twisted my ankle. I’m also a bit scraped up.”

“I see. We should get back and treat you right away then.”

Unfortunately, Koutarou and the girls had come out on this excursion without so much as a first-aid kit. In order to treat Clan’s leg, they would need to meet back up with the crew from room 106 first.

“But, Satomi-kun, what do we do now? How can we get back if we don’t even know where we are?”

“That’s a good point...”

It was only when Harumi pointed it out that it set in on Koutarou that they were lost. They knew vaguely where they were and where they needed to be, but getting from one point to another wasn’t that simple in the dark. They’d strayed awfully far from the path now, and there wasn’t even cellphone coverage for them to find a way out of the valley.

“For the time being, I think it would be best to head over there.”

“Over where?”

“Over there. Just beyond the valley is a small hut, right?”

“Ah! Good eye, Clan!”

As luck would have it, there was an old wooden hut within eyeshot of where they found themselves. They didn’t know whose it was or why it was there, but the shelter would be a big help whether they decided to rest, to try and treat Clan’s leg, or to look for a path back.

Approaching the hut that Clan had spotted, they discovered a partially destroyed charcoal kiln next to it. It seemed the abandoned hut was several decades old, from a time when charcoal was still a popular fuel.

“It looks like we can rest inside.”

Since making charcoal took a great deal of time, it was common to have a shack or other shelter nearby. A charcoal burner’s hut would sometimes appear in the novels Harumi enjoyed reading, so she knew exactly what it was when she saw it.

“I just hope there’s a phone...” Clan said from over Koutarou’s shoulder.

Because she’d twisted her ankle, Koutarou was carrying her on his back. It wasn’t like she couldn’t walk at all, but Koutarou wouldn’t let her, just in case.

“Considering the sorry state this place is in, I think the chances of that are pretty low.”

There were no signs of life in the hut, and no signs of it being connected to the outside world. There were no electrical wires coming from it and there was no antenna on the roof. It really did look like it had come from several decades ago.

“Let’s take a look for now.”

“Yeah.”

With Harumi in the lead, the group approached the hut. They’d walked a decent way now, and Koutarou took a moment to look up at the sky. The stars were shining brightly and lit up the area just outside

the valley.

“Veltlion?”

“Take a look, Clan. What a beautiful night sky.”

“You’re right...”

Koutarou stopped to look up at the sky together with Clan. Being so far from the city, the stars were clearly visible. It looked like tiny gems had been scattered in the sky above them. And as he admired the scene, a strange sense of déjà vu came over Koutarou.

“Where was that...?”

“What is it, Satomi-kun?”

Realizing that Koutarou had stopped walking, Harumi stopped too and turned around. She then followed his gaze and looked up at the starry sky.

“Looking up at the stars like this, I feel like I’ve seen it before somewhere.”

“Ah, you’re right...”

Still looking up at the stars, Harumi smiled wistfully. She remembered it clearly. It was the day she first met Koutarou.

“You’re probably thinking of the day we first met, Koutarou-sama. Back then, you were also carrying Clan-sama, remember? And...”

Harumi had been cornered by a cliff when a knight in blue armor made a dashing appearance and defeated the coup d’état soldiers pursuing her. After that, the knight carried his servant—who she later found out wasn’t actually his servant at all—on his back as the three of them walked through the forest together. And after they’d met up with her allies, she’d had a conversation with Koutarou under the starry sky much like this.

“From an endless time and immeasurable distance... That was what you said as you looked up at the sky, Koutarou-sama. I’m sure that’s what you’re thinking of.”

Those words had been starkly engraved into Harumi’s very being. That was just how strong of an impression they’d left on her. She would never forget those words no matter how much time passed. It was following the feelings in those words that had led her to Koutarou again.

“Harumi, you...”

Clan’s eyes were wide open, and so were Koutarou’s. The two of them were speechless.

“Huh...?”

Harumi was puzzled by their reaction. But what puzzled her even more were her own words.

Koutarou-sama? Looking up at the starry sky? Aren’t these Princess Alaia’s memories...?

Eventually Harumi realized what she’d done and her face turned

bright red.

“I-I’m sorry, Satomi-kun! I confused Princess Alaia’s memories with my own... I’m really sorry for saying such weird things!”

Harumi had inherited Alaia’s memories along with the ability to control Signaltin’s powers, but she still had her own. A great deal of Alaia’s memories aligned with Harumi’s from the play, but nevertheless, they were still distinct. Yet every now and then when her emotions were running high, it was almost like Alaia’s memories would come first in her mind. It embarrassed Harumi to think she’d gotten too into her role.

They’re surprisingly similar... It’s completely unfounded, but I wonder if Harumi might really be Alaia’s reincarnation...

Clan, who’d personally known Alaia, didn’t at all think it was a matter of Harumi getting into character. No, it felt like she was talking to Alaia herself rather than Harumi pretending to be Alaia, which was an interesting surprise. It was to the point where Clan, who had absolute faith in science, began wondering if Harumi might be the reincarnation of the Silver Princess.

“It’s fine. I was surprised, but it was like getting to talk to Her Majesty for a second. It was nice.”



Like Clan, Koutarou too was surprised to hear Harumi talking just like Alaia. While he kept a clear distinction between the two girls in his mind, he didn't hate catching a glimpse of Alaia in Harumi every now and then. He still missed her, so it was comforting.

"I'm glad..."

Harumi was sure that Koutarou and Clan would laugh at her, so she was relieved when that didn't turn out to be the case. By now, she had completely returned to herself as Harumi.

"But that's right. I'd forgotten you know us from when we were in Forthorthe, Sakuraba-senpai."

"Yes. I mean, it's all from Princess Alaia's point of view. There are also things I don't know or understand."

While Harumi had inherited Alaia's memories, the transfer wasn't perfect. There were plenty of memories that were missing. Memories that weren't that strong or compelling must have been lost travelling the vast distance that was two thousand years and ten million light years. They also suspected that there were certain memories Alaia had intentionally chosen not to pass along. For example, there were no memories of people dying. Clan's theory was that this was intended to keep her memories from being too much of a burden on Harumi.

"But I know that Satomi-kun and Clan-san shared a room."

"Please forget about that part, Harumi!"

"Heehee... I also know that Satomi-kun washed Clan-san's underwear."

"Kyaaaah! When did you see that?!"

"That's right. Clan went on and on about how a princess doesn't do her own laundry. But she didn't want to ask Mary-san to do it either. What a selfish princess."

"In the end, Koutarou-sama, I mean... Satomi-kun had to wash them by hand."

"I spent every day wondering if it was okay for me to get used to looking at those."

"Jeez, the two of you are being really mean!"

Clan felt like running away, but thanks to her ankle, she was stuck on Koutarou's back. With nowhere to hide, she buried her face in Koutarou's shoulder and poured even more strength into her arms wrapped around him.

"But..." Seeing that Clan was looking away, Harumi's smile changed a little. "In the end, these are Princess Alaia's memories. I wasn't there myself, so it's a little lonely."

She was smiling, but it was a sad smile. Memories were memories; they were only a fragment of the real experience. It was similar to watching a recording of it. And that made her feel a little lonely.

While she and the others shared memories, she hadn't actually shared those experiences with her friends.

"That might be true..."

Hearing Koutarou agree, Harumi slumped her shoulders. She knew it was the truth, but hearing Koutarou say it made her feel even more left out. But he wasn't done there.

"But if something similar were to happen in the future, I'm sure you'd remember today. You would remember you, me, and Clan being lost in the woods."

"Satomi-kun..."

Harumi looked up at Koutarou. Seeing his smile, her lonely disappointment vanished in an instant. And an expectation of sorts took form in her eyes.

"We can just create our own experiences from now on. We have more than enough time."

"Ah..."

A small breath escaped her lips before they lifted up into a smile. Her eyes were filled with joy that overflowed in the form of tears streaming down her cheeks. Harumi's heart throbbed and she felt like crying out loudly.

"Sa... Satomi-kun, Clan-san... Would you help me create new experiences from now on...?"

This was Harumi pushing herself to her limit. Because of her weak constitution, Harumi had given up on a lot of things in life. But there was no longer a need for that. She even had people that didn't want her to give up. So she mustered her courage and took a step forward, for both her sake and Koutarou's.

"Of course, Sakuraba-senpai."

"You don't have to be so reserved, Harumi. You're one of very few people I consider a friend."

"Thank you very much, Satomi-kun, Clan-san... I am really glad that I came to the beach with all of you."

To anyone else, it would have just been one tiny step forward. But to Harumi, it was a giant leap towards a happy future.

While they were able to find a first-aid kit inside the abandoned hut, it looked just as old as the building. The only useable items left inside were bandages, gauze, and some simple medicines. But it was far better than nothing. This would at least allow them to treat Clan's injuries.

"That should do it."

"Satomi-kun, you're pretty good at first aid."

"I learned it in Forthorthe. It was essentially back then."

"He was terrible at remembering it, though."

“Heehee, so you were the one who taught him, Clan-san?”

“Sakuraba-senpai, can I leave her to you for a moment?”

“Satomi-kun?”

“I was thinking of taking a look around outside.”

Koutarou showed the map he’d picked up to Harumi and Clan. He’d found it while he was searching the hut for the first-aid kit. It seemed to be of the surrounding area, so they could use it to get out of the valley and back to the others. Koutarou thought he’d go take a look and see if everything checked out.

“I understand. Please be careful.”

“I will.”

“Just don’t wander off.”

“I won’t. I’ll be back soon.”

Koutarou grabbed the map and a flashlight and left the hut. The girls could see the light from the window for a while, but it eventually disappeared into the distance. With that, the girls were left alone in the hut.

“Since we’re done with the treatment for now, I’ll dim the lights a little bit.”

“Yes, please do.”

Harumi stood up and reached overhead. They’d hung a flashlight from the ceiling so they could see to treat Clan, but in order to save power, Harumi dimmed it for the time being. They didn’t know how long it would last and wanted to stay on the safe side.

“Okay.”

Once she’d done that, Harumi sat back down next to Clan.

“Thank you, Harumi.”

“Of course.”

Silence then fell over the hut. Neither Harumi nor Clan were the particularly talkative type and often found themselves with nothing to talk about. But the silence between them wasn’t awkward. They’d spent a lot of time together thanks to the PAF, and had developed something of a mutual understanding.

“Say, Harumi...”

However, Clan broke the comfortable silence. There was something she wanted to ask Harumi about, and this was her chance now that Koutarou wasn’t around.

“May I ask you something?”

“Sure. Go ahead.”

Harumi nodded encouragingly. Clan was always helping her out, so she had no reason to refuse.

“This is hard to ask, but... I will ask anyway,” Clan said, adjusting her glasses. “Harumi, do you love Veltlion, I mean... Koutarou?”

“...?!”

Clan was asking about a matter very close to Harumi's heart, but her asking about it now was like a bolt out of the blue. Harumi found herself at an utter loss for words.

"You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

"It's not like I don't want to. I was... just surprised..."

Harumi shook her head, her long hair fluttering behind her. Looking at just her silhouette in the darkened room, Clan was once again reminded of Alaia.

Harumi then put her hand on her chest, took a deep breath, and answered Clan's question.

"I... love Satomi-kun. He's strong and kind, but he also has a weak and lonely side... I want to warm up that part of him... That's why I..."

Harumi suppressed the desire to turn away from her feelings. Knowing this was something she couldn't deny or lie about, she told the truth. Clan smiled wryly.

"Knowing that much, neither of us can back down now, Harumi."

"Could it be... You do as well, Clan-san?"

"Yes. Somewhere along the line watching that stupid knight who can only live his life awkwardly, I grew attached to him. Besides, he's also one of very few who truly understand me."

"I see..."

Harumi felt relieved upon learning that Clan felt the same way she did. While they might be rivals in love, there was no hostility between them. If anything, Harumi felt reassured knowing she had more companions like Yurika.

"You seem confident, Harumi."

Clan took Harumi's comfort with what she'd said as a sign of confidence. But Harumi shook her head.

"It's not confidence. If anything, it's a lack thereof."

"You mean you're not confident?"

"Precisely. Satomi-kun has a very large hole in his heart. And since I'm still just a girl, I don't think I'll be able to fill it on my own. So I'd be happy if there are more people who'll also pour warmth into him."

That was something she'd talked about with Yurika in the past. Koutarou's heart was badly wounded. Harumi wanted to heal him. She wanted to save him, but she knew that she couldn't do it on her own as she was. That's why she hoped there were others who shared her desire.

"Harumi, you just might understand Veltlion better than anyone else."

"I knew he was different the moment he asked to learn how to knit. All I did after that was watch and learn."

Harumi had learned of the hole in Koutarou's heart through the

knitting society. It was hard to believe that a normal high school boy really wanted to learn how to knit. Especially an athletic boy like Koutarou. But he always honestly toiled away trying to learn during their club meetings. Harumi had always wondered why—what drove him. So she spent a long time puzzling over it, and after getting to know him better, she came to the conclusion that Koutarou wanted to finish knitting a sweater that someone special had left behind. And once she put that together, she supported him completely. She'd been on his side ever since, and somewhere along the line, she'd developed a special place in her heart for this earnest, awkward boy.

"But you already knew, didn't you, Clan-san?"

Harumi's intuition told her that Clan had realized the same thing she had.

"Yes, but I was there when it happened. It's not like I figured it out on my own like you did."

Clan knew about Koutarou's past because she'd been with him ten years ago when it happened. She saw his suffering firsthand and knew why he felt the way he did now.

"I believe the others have also reached the same conclusion or are on the verge of it."

"I'm sure they are..."

Clan knew that Kiriha had undoubtedly put things together by now. It was also more than likely that Clan's rivals, Theia and Ruth, had as well. Harumi and Yurika were close, so she suspected Harumi had filled her in. The only uncertainties were Maki, Sanae, and Shizuka, but considering their behavior up until now, chances were they had some idea. That was why Clan and Harumi assumed that the girls of room 106 were all more or less on the same page.

"It's going to take a lot of warmth to mend Satomi-kun's broken heart. We need to teach him that he can rely on the warmth of others."

"Until that's done, Veltlion won't choose any one person anyway."

"Certainly."

"Hahh... He really is a troublesome man."

Clan let out a sigh and slumped her shoulders. She was amazed at herself for falling for someone who was such a pain. Harumi, however, had a smile on her face.

"I think it's wonderful. After all, we can help the man we love."

Koutarou wasn't some invincible hero, so the girls would take their places next to him. There were things only they could do for him. And none of them wanted their relationship to be one-sided. They wanted to do something for him since he was always protecting them. They wanted to be equals. And the thought of that made Harumi very, very happy.

"I'm envious that you can actually say that out loud."

"It took over a year for me to be able to though."

"I wonder if I'll be able to do the same someday..."

"You will. You're a girl, after all."

"You're the only one who'd say that, Harumi."

"Satomi-kun says it a lot as well, doesn't he?"

"He's just playing around with me!"

"Heeheehee, how troublesome indeed..."

Harumi and Clan continued chatting away. The topic gradually shifted from Koutarou to other things, but they were just as deep and meaningful. It was through talks like this that Clan and Harumi got closer.

When Koutarou returned to the hut, he had Sanae-chan on his back. She'd gotten worried about Koutarou when he hadn't come back, so she'd abandoned her body to go searching for him.

"Here it is... I'm back, Clan, Sakuraba-senpai."

"Ah, there you are, Harumi! And you, Glasses! Are you okay?!"

When Koutarou entered the hut, the two girls immediately dropped what they were doing and turned their attention to him.

"Welcome back, Satomi-kun. And welcome to you too, Higashihongan-san."

"I'm fine. I just twisted my ankle a little."

"I see. Phew, that's good..."

Sanae-chan had also been concerned about Clan after hearing she was hurt, so she felt much better to see that she was actually safe and sound.

"I'm sorry for making you worry."

"It's fine. I'm just glad you're okay. But let's just hang out for now. Everyone is on their way here."

Sanae-chan had left to go looking for Koutarou's team after the fourth team returned before they did. Tracking down Koutarou was easy with her psychic powers. And using her link with Sanae-san, she'd let others know where they were.

"Clan-san, it looks like this will be resolved easier than we thought."

"This is a little different from past Forthorthe after all."

"Heehee."

While they might have a few special powers, Harumi and Clan were still normal girls. Being lost in the woods made them nervous. But now it was clear everything would be all right.

"By the way, Koutarou, how did this happen?"

"Well, Clan was being slow and—"

"Anyone would fall if the ground gave way beneath them!"

“There you have it.”

“Hmm...”

Since Clan had summed up what happened, Koutarou left it at that. Sanae-chan nodded, apparently satisfied with this. But that wasn't the case for Clan.

“I... I'm going to kill you... I really am going kill you one day...”

“Now, now, calm down. It's true that you're slow.”

“Harumi?!”

“Heehee, I'm just joking.”

“Jeez, you don't have to be a bully too!”

“I'm sorry, Clan-san.”

With their little group back together and help on the way, the mood was so bright that no one minded the dim light in the hut. And things would get even livelier when the others arrived. That was just the kind of relationship Koutarou and the girls all shared. This was the life they'd chosen to live together.

A Mother and Daughter's Wish

Saturday, August 14th

Koutarou was kind to everyone, but he also kept people at a distance. That tendency was the consequence of a tragic loss in his childhood. While he'd never said so directly, Theia had put things together by now.

"...And that's why Ruth and I want to do something about Koutarou. But we can't seem to find a way to help him immediately, so we're forced to take things one step at a time."

After realizing what Koutarou was going through, Theia couldn't leave him be. She wanted to do something, but there was no clear and obvious solution. Koutarou had once promised to make sure the girls all lived happy lives, but there didn't seem to be a way to return the favor.

"I see... The death of Layous-sama's mother is why he pushes other people away..." said Elfaria after hearing everything Theia said.

After witnessing the death of his own mother, Koutarou was incapable of overlooking misfortune in front of him. But at the same time, he'd never recovered from her loss. He knew all too well that no relationship lasted forever, and in his heartbreak, he'd given up even trying. That was why he would make promises with other people, but never expected them to be returned.

"Mother, how can Ruth and I save Koutarou?"

Afflicted by that question, Theia had come to Elfaria aboard Blue Knight for answers. She and Ruth were only teenage girls, so they lacked a certain amount of life experience. She was hoping her mother might see a solution she didn't.

"Well..."

Elfaria stopped to think. Despite being over thirty, she had a very youthful appearance. Playfully tilting her head to the side only highlighted it.

"..."

"..."

Theia held her breath as she waited for her mother's answer. Ruth, who was preparing some Rubustori tea for them, also had her ear trained on Elfaria.

"First of all... I think rushing things is a bad idea. Layous-sama is essentially afraid of getting too close to others. So you especially need

to be careful, Theia, since you're so hasty."

"I know that! That's why I came to ask you before I do anything reckless!"

"So, Your Majesty, what should we do?"

"Heehee..."

Seeing Theia and Ruth instinctively lean forward as they waited to hear her answer, Elfaria smiled. Puzzled by that reaction, the two girls looked at each other in confusion.

"It pays to go on a journey. My darling Theia, who used to be so quick to make enemies, is now frantic to save others. And the very serious Ruth now looks so passionate. I never would've imagined these results two years ago. You're both growing up splendidly."

Having been apart from the two girls for so long, the changes they'd undergone were obvious to Elfaria.

Theia had never had a father, and her mother was often absent because of her role as empress. That was why she'd always been so desperate to be of help to her. And her only ally in it all had been her childhood friend Ruth. Ruth was the only person devoted to her. The only one she knew would never betray her. As a princess, Theia was always surrounded by people. And people brought intrigue. She made enemy after enemy with no reprieve. And the worse it got, the harder it became to trust people at all. Yet now, that very same Theia was surrounded by friends. Moreover, she was going out on a limb to try and save one of them.

Ruth was in a similar situation. She'd always had a very serious personality and, as a guardian knight, she often suppressed her own feelings. She never said anything selfish and always worked hard for Theia. While there were times when Ruth would share her opinion with Theia, it was always for Theia's sake. She never acted for her own gain. That was why, when Elfaria heard about the beetle incident and Ruth breaking off her arranged engagement, she realized Theia wasn't the only one who'd changed. Before she knew it, Ruth had gone from being a mere attendant to a valuable retainer. She could now balance her personal feelings and her official title. She was an asset to Theia, and always there to support her. She had become the ideal childhood friend and ally.

Elfaria found the changes in both girls to be most welcome. She could say with confidence that Theia was now a viable successor to the throne. And Ruth as she was now was easily her chief retainer. Since this all far exceeded what Elfaria had expected to come of Theia's trial, Elfaria couldn't be happier they'd embarked on their journey to the other side of the universe.

"Ruth and I may have grown up, but that won't save our knight. Just what should we do?"

“Please tell us, Your Majesty. Please guide us immature girls down the right path.”

To them, this was as big a problem as being chased out of Forthorthe. But seeing the two of them so desperate, Elfaria laughed.

“You two being the way you are right now is the answer. Ah, hahaha, how funny...”

“The way we are...”

“...Right now?”

Theia and Ruth looked at each other once more upon hearing Elfaria’s cryptic answer. Once she was done laughing, Elfaria explained what she meant.

“Just make Layous-sama grow up the same way you two did. He’s changed too, hasn’t he?”

“Yes, though only a little at a time...”

“I believe so as well.”

The two girls nodded in unison. Elfaria was right.

“Then Layous-sama likely already allows you closer than he did before. Just by being the way you are right now, you’ll be able to mend his heart as long as you stay by his side. This’ll take time of course, so it might be difficult for my hasty Theia...”

Elfaria smiled as she took a sip of the tea that Ruth had poured up for her. Ruth was rather talented, and the exact flavor she had expected spread through her mouth.

“So we haven’t been useless to him...”

“I feel a little relieved.”

“What you need to do right now is to be Layous-sama’s family. I believe that is the most important thing.”

“Then we should be fine, mother. I have confidence in that.”

Theia put her hand on her chest and gave Elfaria a determined nod.

During the underground battle a while back, the Sun Rangers had asked Theia what kind of relationship she and the others had with Koutarou. She’d boldly answered that they were family, and she didn’t doubt that answer in the slightest. She had absolute confidence that the residents of room 106 were so close that they could be called family.

“And in the end, I am sure that Layous-sama will have to come face to face with his own heart. When he does, help him.”

In Elfaria’s mind, what people needed to fully recover was time and healing. If Theia and the girls stayed by his side, that shouldn’t be a problem. And once the hole in his heart shrank to a manageable size, he’d have to confront it for himself. That would mean finally coming to terms with the tragic death of his mother, which wouldn’t be easy or pleasant. When that time came, Koutarou would surely

need help.

“Listen up, Theia, Ruth. Be prepared to spend as much time with Lalous-sama as you have in the past, and then, when he’s ready, lend Lalous-sama your strength. That is almost certainly the only way for you two to save him.”

“I understand, mother! I will do just that!”

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty. I will carve your words into my heart.”

Theia and Ruth held hands and nodded. They were prepared to walk down the path that Elfaria had shown them together.

After saying goodbye to Elfaria, the two girls headed back to room 106. It wasn’t their actual home, but their talk with Elfaria had affirmed for them more than ever that it was where they belonged.

“We’re back.”

“Indeed, we’ve returned.”

“Welcome back, Theia, Ruth-san.”

Koutarou readily welcomed them. He had no reason to since they were still just invaders, but his warm voice told them that he didn’t mind so much anymore. They were truly welcome here.

This is probably what it means to be a family...

Theia thought back to the conversation she’d just had with her mother. These normal, everyday reassurances would eventually save Koutarou. Thinking that, she was overcome with a refreshing hope.

“Master, what are you doing?”

“I’m doing my summer vacation homework. I’ve been ignoring it for a while now, so I figured I should get to it while I can.”

“I see. By the way, Master, how about some barley tea?”

“That’d be great.”

“Then I’ll prepare it right away.”

A smiling Ruth vanished into the kitchen, leaving only Koutarou and Theia in the inner room. Realizing they were alone, Theia cocked her head to the side.

“By the way, Koutarou, I don’t see anyone else.”

Room 106 was normally bustling. As of late, it had become the norm for all ten friends to be stuffed in there at once. But Koutarou seemed to be home alone right now, piquing Theia’s curiosity as to where the other seven girls were.

“They all left to go shopping. I stayed behind to get started on this homework.”

Between going to his part-time job and goofing off with Kenji, Koutarou often wasn’t home. As a result, he’d fallen behind the other residents of room 106 in his homework. They’d agreed to leave him behind so he could make some progress on it.

“You could just copy from one of the others.”

“No can do. That’d be a bad influence for Sanae and Yurika.”

“You could just do it in secret.”

“I said no can do and that’s final.”

“Heh, you’re stubborn as always.”

Theia acted like she was surprised by what he was saying, but she was smiling all the while. Even when it came to schoolwork, he behaved himself like a model knight. She’d be more than happy to praise him for it.

“Then I’ll borrow your back for a while.”

“Okay.”

Theia sat down back-to-back with Koutarou. It was convenient, each of them serving as a backrest for the other. Sitting together like that, Theia started playing a game as Koutarou continued his homework. Just her leaning on him wasn’t enough to disrupt his concentration. It had been over a year since Theia and had first come to room 106, and Koutarou was more than used to noise and distractions.

“Say, Koutarou.”

“Hmm?”

“When you take a break from homework, play with me.”

“When I take a break.”

“Yeah.”

Koutarou and Theia carried on like that for a while. Though they were each doing different things, it didn’t feel like it for some reason.

Koutarou’s goal was to get through ten pages of his homework assignment. He was already on his ninth page by the time Theia and Ruth returned, and within an hour, he’d completed all the problems. Once he was finished, as promised, he started playing games with Theia and Ruth.

“Theia, shouldn’t we go back for now?”

“We’ll be fine a little longer. We can overcome with technique.”

Koutarou and Theia were playing a two-player action RPG. They were deep inside of a jungle and about to run out of healing items. Without any means to recover their health, a single slip would spell a game over.

“If we push our luck, we’ll just have to do this all over again.”

“It would be a disgrace to the Mastir family if I were to retreat over something so silly.”

“What disgrace is there to be had in an old video game?”

“But...”

“You’re supposed to be Theia-chan right now, not Princess Theiamillis, anyway.”

“Is that what Koutarou-chan really thinks?”

“Yeah.”

“Then fine. Let’s go back.”

“That’s more like it. You should be more receptive to people’s warnings.”

Theia wanted to continue exploring, but Koutarou convinced her to return to town. After making it back and stocking up for their next adventure, Koutarou and Theia paused the game and took a short break.

“Good work, Your Highness, Master.”

Ruth put down two icy glasses of barley tea in front of them.

“Thank you, Ruth.”

“You’re a lifesaver.”

Thirsty from concentrating so hard on the game, the two of them gladly picked up their glasses. The cool barley tea felt great in their dry mouths. After kicking back and sipping on their tea for a bit, Theia turned and looked at Koutarou, glass still in hand.



“Say, Koutarou-chan...”

“Hmm?”

Koutarou lowered his drink and looked over at Theia. The two of them were now facing each other with Ruth watching on from the side.

“There’s something I want to ask you.”

“I don’t mind... but stop it with the ‘Koutarou-chan.’”

Theia sometimes added on “-chan” to distinguish between private and public matters, but Koutarou thought it was going a little too far.

“Does it embarrass you?” Theia asked after blinking twice.

“Yeah.”

Koutarou didn’t avert his eyes, but his blunt voice made it obvious he was indeed embarrassed. Seeing that, a smile appeared on Theia’s lips.

“Heh, then I’ll keep calling you Koutarou-chan for a while.”

“Hey!”

“In return, I’ll allow you to call me Theia-chan.”

“In that case, please call me Ruth-chan as well.”

“Hey now, you two...”

The two girls teamed up to tease Koutarou. Realizing he was outnumbered, his shoulders fell.

“More importantly, back to what I wanted to ask...”

“What do you mean ‘more importantly’?”

“Shush, Koutarou-chan.”

Theia changed the topic, cutting off any hope Koutarou had for a rebuttal. She was smiling both because it was fun to get the better of Koutarou and because she had something fun to bring up.

“The thing is, I want to let mother and the citizens get some air.”

Currently aboard Blue Knight were Elfaria and the citizens of Forthorthe that supported her. They’d been on the ship for some time now, and while there were no physical complications, they were surely feeling cooped-up by now. So Theia wanted to take Elfaria and the others down to the surface for some fresh air and a change of scenery.

“That’s a good idea.”

Koutarou nodded in agreement, but Ruth quickly followed up.

“There are a great deal of citizens on board, however, and they have virtually no knowledge of Earth. Her Highness and I aren’t enough to manage them all, so we were hoping you might be generous enough to help, Mashter.”

“That’s touching and I’d love to help, but there’s one big problem.”

“What’s that?”

“Seriously, cut it out with the nicknames. Especially you, Ruth-san.”

Koutarou clutched his head in pain.

“It seems like he likes it.”

“It was worth the effort to say it, then.”

But the two girls paid him no mind. They had no intention of listening to him.

“You guys...”

“Give it up. Ruth and I love you, Koutarou-chan.”

“But if you say that you hate us, we’ll stop right away, Mashter.”

“Seriously... you two have been playing dirty lately...”

When they first met, they’d clashed nearly every day. But now that they got along, it seemed the girls were finally getting serious as invaders. They’d made such a straightforward attack that Koutarou could hardly defend himself. All he could do was grin and bear it.

After consulting the other girls of room 106 regarding the Forthorthians visiting Earth, they all agreed to help. Theia and Kiriha would be in charge of the excursion. Theia taking charge was obvious, and Kiriha was given a leadership position because she’d also be taking a large part in the operation.

One of the underground dwellers’ base would be needed to temporarily receive the Forthorthian citizens from Blue Knight. It would be nigh impossible to transport hundreds of people through room 106. After some deliberation, they decided that one of the former radical faction bases would work, so they got Kiriha on board for the project.

The incident with the radical faction had only recently come to an end. Their military forces had been disbanded, leaving their bases empty. But since they’d only recently been abandoned, they were still in good working order. They just weren’t occupied. That made them an ideal location for receiving the crowd of Forthorthian citizens.

The radical faction actually had several bases on the surface, but the one Theia and the others decided to use was just outside Kisshouharukaze City. It was nestled in the mountains away from prying eyes, which made it especially convenient.

Several large tour buses were now departing the former base—each one full of Forthorthian citizens. They’d all been transported down to Earth yesterday morning and were given lectures on things to keep an eye out for while on the planet. Then that afternoon, they were allowed outside to get a taste for the hills and surrounding area. Since Forthorthians looked like foreigners in Japan and would get a great deal of attention if they all travelled together, they were split up

into groups and sent out on different buses. The People of the Earth who'd already adjusted to living on the surface—Kiriha's subordinates—would be acting as their guides for the day.

"How many is that, Ruth?"

"That makes seventeen, Your Highness."

"So the next bus is the last."

In total there were eighteen buses in the group. With around forty people aboard each one, they had over seven hundred people going out on the town. There were also a few dozen more citizens staying back at the base—those who preferred nature over sightseeing, those with health issues, and a handful of capable people just in case something happened.

"Still, Kiriha, I'm impressed you managed to gather so many buses in such a short amount of time. You have my thanks."

"We People of the Earth have already spread our roots far and wide. It wasn't too hard to come up with a few buses. Besides, I'm still in your debt for helping us. I should be the one thanking you, so don't worry about it."

Theia and Kiriha stood shoulder to shoulder as they saw off the seventeenth bus. The children inside were all smiling and waving at Theia. She smiled and waved back as they pulled out.

"Then let me say thank you for being my friend."

"That's a good idea. Allow me to do the same."

Theia and Kiriha smiled at each other, too. Their bond had deepened after the incident with the radical faction. And it wasn't just them, either. The same was true for everyone in room 106.

"Your Highness, Kiriha-sama. Master has returned."

"I'm back, everyone."

"Good work out there."

"Welcome back, Koutarou."

"The seventeenth bus just departed safely."

Koutarou's job was to guide the Forthorthian citizens from the base to the buses. Once that was done, he'd returned to Theia and Kiriha to check in.

"Kiriha-san, there's only one more, right?"

"That's right. The next bus is the last."

"All right."

Koutarou nodded and looked towards the base. When he did, another group of Forthorthians exited the building. They were the last group of people to depart, and were being guided by Sanae and Shizuka.

"Oh? It seems like Her Majesty Elfaria is coming too."

That was when Ruth spotted Elfaria at the end of the line. She was coming out along with the other Forthorthian citizens. Besides her were

Harumi and Clan, who were serving as Elfaria's guards.

"Theia, is Elle— Er, Elfaria getting on the last bus too?"

"No, that's not on the schedule..."

If Elfaria was going to get on the bus, there would need to be extra guards on it, so Theia should have been informed ahead of time. But she hadn't heard a word about it, so she shook her head in response to Koutarou's question.

"I suppose she's just going to see them off then."

"Then she would've done so at the start to see everyone off..."

"I'm sure she has some other reason. We'll all be off duty after the last bus leaves."

Koutarou and the others had all had jobs picked out for them for the day—including Yurika and Maki who weren't currently present. They were essentially working as traffic control and were likely in the middle of guiding the last bus inside the base from the gate. But once that bus came in, Koutarou and the others would all be free to do as they pleased. Koutarou suspected Elfaria's arrival was related.

"Consider that this is Her Majesty we're talking about. She might want to do something on Earth herself," remarked Ruth.

Everyone nodded in agreement. Koutarou especially so. Knowing Elfaria's personality, he couldn't imagine that she wasn't up to something.

What surprised the citizens of Forthorthe the most was the relationship between Empress Elfaria, Princess Theiamillis, Princess Clariossa, and the boy that had become known as the Blue Knight.

"He hit her! That knight just hit Her Majesty!"

"What's more is that neither Her Majesty nor the two princesses are reprimanding him!"

"As expected of the Blue Knight!"

"He must be the real Blue Knight after all!"

The Blue Knight and the three royals all had a very close relationship. They were like brawling siblings or a rough-and-tumble family where expressions of love and affection sometimes got physical.

"Her Majesty leaned her head forward herself!"

"She probably said something to make the Blue Knight angry on purpose."

"Her Majesty has a childish side, after all."

"Amazing... Despite disrespecting three royals, he's not being punished at all... Can he really be the Blue Knight?"

"That's why I said it has to be him! Adults are so suspicious. It's not my fault if Blue Knight gets angry."

Violence against royalty was a grave crime, regardless of the

reason. Yet no one had so much as scolded Koutarou. If anything, it looked like the empress and the princesses were enjoying their odd relationship with him.

“Regardless of whether or not he’s the real Blue Knight, it’s clear he’s no normal knight.”

“I guess he can’t be the real Blue Knight if he’s an alien...”

“So he’s someone special to them, huh?”

The young Blue Knight once again captured the attention of the Forthorthian citizens. They didn’t know why he was allowed to be so unruly. If he were indeed the Blue Knight like they assumed, surely that would be a serious problem. And if he weren’t, it would only be a bigger problem. But nevertheless, one thing was clear—the royals were making an exception for him.

“That knight destroyed DKI’s latest weapons with ease and used a single ship to repel the enemy fleet.”

“There’s also the red dragon and the silver-haired girl with him.”

“It might be foolish to even question whether he’s the real Blue Knight or not...”

If he really was the Blue Knight, all that had changed was who was making exceptions for him—it had gone from Princess Alaia of two thousand years ago to the three royals at present. Either way, it was quite clear he had a special relationship with the royal families. And that gave new hope to the Forthorthians chased out of their motherland.

Elfaria had come out to ask Koutarou if she could go sightseeing too. Her answer came in the form of a loud thud.

“Ow!”

“Of course you can’t! Elle, have you forgotten who you are?!”

“After being chased out of my country by a coup d’etat, I’m now an unemployed shut-in, Layous-sama.”

“You pain in the ass, have you forgotten about your duty?!”

“I haven’t forgotten. I am continuing my information gathering to be able to retake the country. However, it is without a doubt the truth that I am unemployed.”

“The hundreds of people in your care would be completely lost if anything were to happen to you.”

Koutarou vehemently objected to Elfaria going sightseeing. The threat of Elexis still hadn’t passed, so it was entirely possible that she might get attacked if she went out walking around the city. Theia was less at risk since she was just one of several princesses, but Koutarou couldn’t let the empress—the most important person in all Forthorthe—walk around the city freely.

“That’s why I’m asking you to be my bodyguard, Layous-sama.”

“Koutarou, I’m asking you too. Mother is tired after being confined to the spaceship for so long. Her suffering mentally would be just as bad as being attacked, wouldn’t it?”

“Ugh...”

After Theia’s intervention, Koutarou began changing his mind. She had a point, after all. It was important for them to make sure Elfaria stayed healthy.

“That’s right, Layous-sama! If I collapse, everything will be for nothing!”

However, when Koutarou saw the way Elfaria’s eyes were sparkling, he began having third thoughts. It might be best to keep her in check. Twenty years had passed, but she was still dangerously carefree.

“Let’s go sightseeing on Earth so I don’t collapse!”

“Hey, Elle, stop using yourself as a hostage to threaten me.”

“I would never threaten you. It’s just important that I stay healthy.”

“You’re the same as you were back then...”

“I’m still a teenager in mind and body.”

“Good grief...”

Koutarou held his head. Elfaria had been quick to jump on Theia’s bandwagon, but she wasn’t wrong. Nevertheless, it was still a risky proposition. Koutarou was reluctant to take her anywhere too crowded. He was stuck weighing the pros and cons when Clan lent him a helping hand.

“Hahh... Veltlion, why don’t you change your way of thinking for a moment?”

“What do you mean?”

“Rather than you alone, all ten of us can protect Elfaria-san. That will significantly increase the odds of keeping her safe.”

Sanae’s psychic powers, Yurika and Maki’s magic, Kiriha’s wits and spiritual energy technology, Shizuka’s draconic might, Harumi’s Signaltin, plus Theia, Ruth, and Clan’s advanced technology. With all of their powers combined, even if Elfaria was attacked, they should be able to defend her and get her to safety. It was also hard to imagine that Elexis and Maya would attack someone so heavily guarded. Koutarou understood Clan’s point. Just increasing their defenses would help protect Elfaria.

“I guess that’s the only way...”

After thinking over it carefully, Koutarou reluctantly agreed to let Elfaria go out. Sanae, Clan, and Ruth could detect any approaching enemies, and Yurika could teleport Elfaria to a safe place using a spell she’d prepared beforehand while everyone else dealt with the attackers. And if they left command of things to Kiriha, they would be

able to guard Elfaria with even more certainty. That was the plan that formed in Koutarou's mind.

"Then let's go, Layous-sama! To explore an unknown planet!"

"Elle, you're not gonna meet a pretty end..."

"You'll kill me yourself, Layous-sama?!" Elfaria exclaimed with a bright smile.

"You jerk... You're saying that knowing I can't, aren't you...?"

As Koutarou held his head in pain, Clan began laughing for some reason.

"Ohohohohoho!"

"Wh-What now all of a sudden?"

"Serves you right! That's how you always make me feel! Ohohoho!"

She felt like he was getting his just deserts, and took a very special pleasure in seeing someone else get the better of him.

Koutarou and the others were all together to escort Elfaria, but they looked less like bodyguards and more like a group of friends going out. Elfaria had traded in her royal gown for Earth-style street clothes to better fit in. At first glance, she just looked like a foreign tourist being shown around town.

"Mother, these are called takoyaki."

"Takoyaki? How round and peculiar they are. They appear to be some sort of food."

"Ruth, I'll leave the detailed explanation to you."

"Very well, Your Highness. Your Majesty, takoyaki is a common snack the people of this country like to enjoy. It's a very popular dish."

"So it's similar to lakron back home?"

"The appearance is approximate, but it's closer to normal food."

"Why not have her try some before you explain? That'd be more fun."

"Shizuka is right. Here, mother, try one."

"Heehee, okay... Oh, hot! Hot!"

Elfaria timidly put the takoyaki in her mouth and her eyes nearly bulged out of her head. Both the taste and temperature of the takoyaki far exceeded her expectations. Seeing Elfaria react just like they'd hoped, the girls around her smiled.

"Takoyaki, huh...?"

"Maki-chan, do you like takoyaki?"

"I've never really had them, so I don't know."

"Then give them a taste. Satomi-san!"

Yurika escaped from the circle of girls and ran over to Koutarou, who was keeping an eye on their surroundings from a short distance

away. She presented both of her hands to him with a wide grin on her face.

"I want to treat Maki-chan to some takoyaki, so please give me money!"

Yurika was poor and careless, so she had no spare money. That's why she decided to request support from Koutarou. She was sure he'd help her out.

"You've finally started to straight up ask for money, huh?"

"Is that a no?"

Yurika cocked her head to the side with a forlorn expression.

"Hang on a sec..."

Koutarou reluctantly opened his wallet and pulled out a thousand yen note. He would have turned her down if she were asking for something selfish, but he couldn't refuse if this was for Maki, who rarely asked for anything for herself. As careless as Yurika was, she cared deeply for Maki.

"Here."

"Thank you very much! Maki-chan, let's go buy takoyaki!"

"A-All right... Thank you, Satomi-kun!"

Maki didn't forget to thank Koutarou as she was being dragged off by an excited Yurika. Seeing that, Koutarou felt like he'd made the right call.

"Koutarou, haven't you been spoiling Yurika too much lately?"

That was when Sanae appeared and gave Koutarou a light tackle. Her cheeks were puffed out like she was pouting.

"What could I do? She said it was for Maki."

"That's not what I'm talking about."

"Then what are you talking about?"

"Here, pat me on the head! Spoil me with all of your love!"

Sanae leaned in toward Koutarou. She was actually sulking because she wanted his attention too.

"Okay, okay."

"When you pat me on the head, you should tell me how much you love me!"

"Thank you for everything you do, Lady Sanae."

"That's a good start!"

Satisfied with Koutarou doting on her, Sanae returned to the group of girls. Once there, she got some takoyaki from Maki. Sanae didn't really feel any ill will towards her or Yurika; she just wanted some of Koutarou's attention too.

"I think this kind of accessory would look great on you, Clan-san."

"If I wore something like that, Veltlion would laugh at me!"

"Really? While he might say all kinds of things, I'm sure he would think it looks nice."

“Mother, what do you think of the takoyaki?”

“With this cute look and superb seasoning, I think I might get addicted.”

“Master loves the takoyaki from this place too.”

“Yurika, why don’t you get a takoyaki from Maki?”

“But I can’t. I bought those takoyaki for her.”

The growling sound from Yurika’s stomach argued with her.

“Just have some already... I can’t bear seeing you drool like that.”

“Are you sure, Maki-chan?! I knew you were a good person from the first day we met!”

“That’s definitely a lie. You get so carried away, Yurika-chan... Heehee.”

Elfaria and the girls continued cheerfully chatting away. The bright atmosphere between them was a match for even the summer sun shining overhead.



After the battle we just went through, I suppose I can let all of this slide...

Koutarou was worried about everyone letting their guard down, but he was also happy that Elfaria and the girls were having fun. That's why he was keeping an extra vigilant watch in their place. Elfaria wasn't the only one that he had to protect, after all.

After Elfaria got a taste for the city around the train station, the group began heading towards Kisshouharukaze High School. Elfaria wanted to see the school where her daughter was studying. While she couldn't enter as it was the middle of summer vacation, she looked around at the schoolhouse and the schoolyard with great interest. Seeing her like this, Koutarou got the feeling Elfaria really was a good mother.

After stopping by the school, the group walked up the hill to see the ruins where Koutarou worked for his part-time job. Elfaria was interested in them as she was an archeologist herself, but she also wanted to see where the legendary Blue Knight worked.

"Elle, everything inside this building are things excavated from the ruins. According to the dig leader, it's only about a tenth of what's here."

Koutarou first took Elfaria to an exhibition hall that was built up next to the excavation site. It was really just a prefab shed, but as the excavation had dragged on, it was filled with a surprising amount of artifacts that were on display.

"So these are remnants of an ancient civilization on Earth... Layous-sama, how old are these?"

"Supposedly ten thousand years. They dated the carbon or something on the earthenware. That's all over my head."

"You must mean radiocarbon dating. If that's the case, then their estimate should be roughly correct."

Elfaria looked at each of the artifacts on display in turn. To Koutarou they were just fragments of jars and arrowheads, but Elfaria was goggling at them like they were diamonds. She'd been a passionate archeologist before she became empress, and this place was like heaven to her. As evidence of an ancient civilization on an alien planet, it was all especially fascinating.

"But... this is strange. If this level of civilization existed ten thousand years ago, then Earth's civilization should be even more advanced by now. The timeline doesn't add up."

Elfaria cocked her head to the side in puzzlement. Comparing these artifacts to similar ones found in Forthorthe, Earth should be far more advanced than it was right now. Elfaria found it strange.

“Was there a large-scale disaster? Or were they wiped out by war...?”

“I’m surprised you can tell, Elle. The higher-ups on the dig are currently arguing about that. I mean, about why all this stuff wasn’t passed down.”

“I thought so... Well, have they reached a conclusion?”

“Not really. There are supposedly no signs of calamitous natural disaster or war, so they think it had to have been an isolated society that was wiped out by an epidemic or something. At least, that’s what they’re discussing now.”

“What interesting ruins. I kind of want to excavate them myself.”

“Hee now...”

“Heehee... By the way, Layous-sama, what is this?”

“Oh, that’s...”

Elfaria and Koutarou continued their lively discussion as they made their way through the exhibit. Elfaria seemed especially spirited since the discussion concerned one of her favorite subjects. There was no one around that could keep up with her when she talked about archeology. Koutarou, who had worked onsite, stood the best chance. Even he didn’t know everything, however, but that only got Elfaria all the more fired up.

The other girls watched Koutarou and Elfaria carry on from afar. Since they didn’t know much about archeology themselves, it was hard to join in on the conversation. Moreover, there seemed to be a particular mood between them no one wanted to ruin.

“Say, Theia-chan, Satomi-kun and Her Majesty met when he was returning from the past, right?” asked Shizuka.

“Yes. Supposedly he came across my mother when he and Clan were procuring parts they needed for the ship.”

“But I feel like that doesn’t explain the mood between them...”

Several of the other girls shared Shizuka’s doubts. Koutarou and Elfaria had met twenty years ago and had only reunited very recently. But they weren’t acting like it. The atmosphere between them was completely different than it was between Koutarou and Kiriha, who had a similar experience, for example.

“Clan-sama would know better than anyone, but...”

As Ruth said that, all the girls turned and looked at Clan, who simply shook her head.

“No comment.”

“What? Don’t be such a cheapskate! Tell us already.”

“Her Majesty lives a life we can’t imagine. I can’t tell you what she’s feeling, but I can tell you she hasn’t been able to live as she pleases. So just let her have her fun while she can.”

Clan knew that Elfaria had fallen for Koutarou twenty years ago, but she didn't know if she still felt that way now. Even if she did, things wouldn't be any easier for her than they'd been in the past. Both as empress and as Theia's mother, she could never be with him. And so, as Elfaria's friend, Clan was asking the others not to pry.

"Hmm... You're pretty cool right now, Glasses."

Sensing how sincere Clan was, Sanae smiled. She didn't understand the circumstances, but she could vaguely understand what Clan was saying. There was a time while she was a ghost that she was worried she couldn't be together with Koutarou. So if Elfaria really did love him, Sanae could imagine how she felt. Because of that, she decided to let it go and leave Elfaria be.

"Mother's feelings, huh..."

That was something Theia hadn't considered. It wasn't hard to imagine that her mother had a strong interest in the Blue Knight, being an archeologist and all. And depending on what had happened when they met twenty years ago, she might have actually fallen in love with him. But Theia was too young to be able to understand how Elfaria must have felt when she sent her daughter to be by his side, or how she felt upon seeing him again after all this time.

"Regardless, I don't think it's a bad idea to give them some time alone. They haven't been able to talk to each other like this in twenty years."

There, Harumi wrapped up the conversation. She might have felt the way she did because of Alaia's feelings inside of her.

"I think so too. Besides, a good woman doesn't pry too much about other women's feelings."

Maki agreed with Harumi. She was the only one to say it out loud, but many of the other girls felt the same way. Elfaria couldn't spend every day with Koutarou like they did, so the least they could do was let her act as she pleased on days like this.

Koutarou and Elfaria were going down the line of artifacts on display, but she suddenly stopped in front of one of them.

This is...

There was something in the exhibit that had caught her eye. It was a slab a dozen or so centimeters long on all sides with some kind of pattern carved into the surface. Elfaria felt like she'd seen the pattern somewhere before.

It looks similar to one of Forthorthe's family crests... But which one was it? Hmm...

It was really the design of the pattern that caught her eye, because it was reminiscent of a Forthorthian family crest. It wasn't completely in a Forthorthian style, however. It looked like the design had more or

less collapsed, so she couldn't quite tell which family crest it reminded her of.

"What is it?"

"Oh... It's nothing. Just my imagination, I think."

In the end, Elfaria decided she was just imagining things. The slab was excavated on Earth and was ten thousand years old. Any resemblance had to be coincidence.

"Heh..."

Koutarou laughed a little at Elfaria. Confused, she looked up at him and tilted her head to the side. She'd already completely forgotten about the slab.

"What's wrong?"

"It's just that when you're thinking, you really do look like an empress, Elle."

While Koutarou's answer surprised Elfaria for a moment, she soon smiled.

"That's not how I want you to see me, Layous-sama."

"You might be onto something. Being empress doesn't really suit you and Theia."

"If you're aware of that, then I feel like you could become a fine emperor."

It was seeing Elfaria's smile that Koutarou thought being empress didn't suit either her or Theia. They were kind people, and sometimes being a ruler was an extremely cruel job.

"Don't push that kind of responsibility onto me."

"No? I became empress when I was around your age, you know. Teehee."

But at the same time, Koutarou knew what he was thinking wasn't quite right. A good empress needed qualities that weren't exactly empress-like. Whenever they were forced to make decisions that would end up hurting people, the deep love within Elfaria and Theia would surely minimize that hurt.

Koutarou had been keeping a vigilant eye out for the group most of the day, but the girls volunteered to keep watch in his stead so he could take a break. They had plenty of people and he would be less effective in the job if he didn't take a break every now and then, so there was really no reason for him to object.

"All right, I wanna do that next!"

"Shooting, huh? You're ten years too early to challenge me to that!"

"Ha, I know how to shoot! There's no way I'll lose!"

"Ohoho, we'll see about that!"

Koutarou and Theia headed for the shooting stall. The group was

currently taking a tour through a festival going on at Kisshou Shrine. Elfaria had requested to come see it because she wanted to get to experience more of the local culture. It just so happened that Koutarou and Theia were on break from taking watch at the same time, so they were wandering around and browsing the stalls together.

“If you want, I can give you a handicap.”

“I don’t need it! Allow me to show you the power of your master!”

They pressed their shoulders into each other as they took aim and fired. The guns for the shooting game used air pressure to fire corks, but they were old and poorly made. The barrels were all distorted, making it so the corks never flew where they were supposed to.

“The first one to master the quirks of their firearm will win... In that case, my victory is certain!”

After firing her first shot, Theia was convinced of her victory. While there was no major difference between her and Koutarou’s overall combat abilities, Theia had an overwhelming advantage when it came to marksmanship. In truth, she’d already started to get a hang of the gun after a single shot.

“You’re too naive, Theia! Shooting isn’t just about skill!”

“What?!”

Koutarou leaned forward over the stall counter. Since there was only a few meters’ distance between them and the targets, leaning forward just a little made a noticeable difference in accuracy. In other words, Koutarou was using his stature to make up for his lack of skill.

“All right, that’s some chocolate for me!”

“Curse you and your mammoth body, Koutarou!”

On the other hand, even if the petite Theia leaned forward, she wouldn’t get the same kind of clearance Koutarou did. She would have to make up for his advantage with pure skill.

“All right!”

“You’re pretty good, Theia!”

“Defeat is not an option for a princess of Forthorthe!”

Koutarou and Theia fired heated shot after heated shot. Right now, the only thing that mattered to either of them was beating the other. All their other worries were far, far away.

Elfaria and Ruth watched over the two of them as they shouted at each other.

“As my vassal, Koutarou, you should show me some more love!”

“Apples and oranges, Theia! I’m not the type to hold back in games!”

While there was a strong bond between them, they still clashed quite often. Especially so when it came to games. They were both competitive and stubborn, to the point their conflicts sometimes

deteriorated into fistfights.

“Theia really loves Layous-sama, doesn’t she?”

But despite their heated shouting, Elfaria was smiling as she watched them. She knew that this intense clashing was a sign of their affection for each other.

“Yes. Master is special, and Her Highness is not afraid to shower him with love.”

“I’m sure meeting someone like that is a wonderful thing.”

“I believe you’re exactly right, Your Majesty.”

Ruth and Elfaria were of the same mind on the matter. They also knew it to be true based on their own experiences. Koutarou was someone they both loved and wanted to be loved by.

“I think Theia might be the only one who can pull off such a brutal love.”

“In my case, getting a light flick on the forehead is my limit.”

Ruth wanted a relationship with Koutarou like Theia’s, but because of her personality, Koutarou treated her differently. That wasn’t to say he treated them unequally, however. He treasured both of them in his own way.

“Yet I’m sure Theia wants him to treat her the way he does you, Ruth.”

“That is what she always says.”

“Heehee, I thought as much.”

Elfaria giggled and smiled as she continued to watch Theia and Koutarou. A deep love for Theia was shining in her eyes. Seeing it, Ruth could tell just how much she adored her daughter. But that wasn’t all there was to it.

“Your Majesty, you really trust Master, don’t you?”

“Of course. Layous-sama is the legendary savior of Forthorthe.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. Both Her Highness and I would trust our lives to Master even if he weren’t the Blue Knight.”

“Ruth...”

Elfaria’s eyes opened wide for an instant before she nodded at Ruth with a smile.

“You’re right. I probably would have entrusted Theia to Layous-sama even if he weren’t the Blue Knight. To that strong and kind, yet timid and cowardly knight...”

Elfaria recalled the way Koutarou suffered trying to escape from the fate laid out for him, and how he desperately tried to protect people in spite of it. That was why she trusted him. She knew his strong and proud heart had been forged through that suffering. Whether Koutarou was the legendary Blue Knight or not wasn’t all that relevant.

Is Her Majesty’s trust for Master because he’s a knight, or is it because

he's Master...?

Getting a sense of Elfaria's implicit trust in Koutarou, a certain question arose in Ruth's mind. Maybe she too had fallen for him twenty years ago. She had a sneaking suspicion, and decided she wanted to confirm it.

"Your Majesty, I am aware that this is impolite, bu—"

"Mother, Ruth, come over here!"

However, before Ruth could ask, Theia suddenly appeared and dragged them off.

"That Koutarou! Despite going up against me, he won't hold back! So I need both of you to help me!"

"Oh my."

"Understood, Your Highness. I shall help in any way I can."

Theia brought the two of them to a stall where she and Koutarou were having a match. Since Ruth wanted a chance to compete against Koutarou like Theia did, she temporarily put her question for Elfaria out of her mind and focused on the task at hand.

"Oh, so you've brought backup."

"Say whatever you like. Thinking about it, I have a huge handicap both in physique and experience."

"I will lend you my aid, Your Highness."

"Now that I'm here, we can't just let Layous-sama have his way. Understood, Theia, Ruth?"

"Yes, mother!"

"As you wish, Your Majesty!"

And so Koutarou began playing with all three of them. They looked like they were having a lot of fun, less like royals and their knights and more like a mother with her daughter and friends. As a result, the festival goers that day thought they were cute but noisy foreigners and nothing more.

The match between Koutarou and Theia started off with Koutarou having the upper hand. At the shooting stall, he made use of his height to win. And while they were playing the goldfish scooping game, he showed off his honed techniques against the inexperienced Theia. But his winning streak wouldn't continue. Theia brought in Elfaria and Ruth as reinforcements for an incredible comeback. Ruth dominated when it came to carving shapes out of candy. And with Elfaria's excellent bargaining skills, she snagged two extra prizes at the yo-yo balloon game. With momentum on her side, Theia won the ring toss, ending their five-round match in a 3:2 victory for Theia's team.

"Ohohoho! Koutarou, I wish for some ramune! Buy three so Ruth and mother can have some as well!"

“Tsk, getting so full yourself...”

“Koutarou, I will let you have half of mine, so don’t sulk.”

“Guess I have to... I’m off, then.”

“Yes, very good.”

While reluctant at first, hearing that Theia would share hers with him, Koutarou decided to oblige her request and go buy them all ramune. Ultimately, he realized that the situation would have been the same regardless of who had won. Besides, all of the money he’d spent today was money Theia had paid him as part of his salary. In the end, their “match” was nothing more than an excuse to have some fun. There was nothing at stake.

“Master, the fireworks will start soon, so meet us on the observation deck when you return.”

“Got it.”

“See you soon, Layous-sama.”

“Don’t take any detours.”

“Why would I?!”

“Come on now. If you don’t hurry, the fireworks will start without you.”

“Whoops, okay. I’m off.”

“See you soon.”

Theia waved as Koutarou walked off, leaving her, Ruth, and Elfaria alone. The other girls were around here and there too, but they’d been keeping their distance so as not to get in Theia and Elfaria’s way. Once Koutarou was gone, they all began climbing up the road that led to the observation deck.

After walking up the road from the shrine, Theia and the others reached the observation deck. They had a nice open and commanding view of Kisshouharukaze City. It was an ideal spot to watch the fireworks, but because there was no public transit to reach it and it wasn’t well lit, the locals didn’t use it. But to the girls of room 106, neither of those were a problem. They’d made their way to the deck regardless, and found themselves the only ones there.

“Mother, this country’s technology is far behind that of our own, but their fireworks are something else. The shows they put on with them are superior to those in Forthorthe, so please enjoy yourself.”

Theia made large gestures with her hands as she pointed overhead. She loved the large flowers of fire that bloomed in the night sky and absolutely wanted her mother to see them for herself.

“Heehee, Theia, you really have grown up.”

“Mother?”

But Elfaria seemed more interested in Theia than anything else. This puzzled her, and she looked up at her mother quizzically.

“The Theia I knew before you left only would have said this planet’s technology was inferior. You never would have admitted that the fireworks were better than the ones in Forthorthe.”

“That might be true.”

Theia was aware of what Elfaria was pointing out, and she as embarrassed to think back on how she was when she first met to Koutarou. If they could meet face to face, she’d lecture her past self.

“Thanks to Koutarou and everyone else, I’ve become a little more of an adult.”

However, Theia was who she was today precisely because of that embarrassment. So though she would lecture her past self, she also wouldn’t want her to do anything differently. Theia’s feelings were complex.

“It’s not easy to admit your own imperfections and become tolerant of others. You’ve made some great friends, Theia.”

“Yes! Everyone here is a precious friend!”

Theia looked over at the girls keeping their distance. They all smiled and blushed a little. It was an honor to be complemented by a leader of a foreign country, and they felt even more warm and fuzzy to hear their friend’s mother complimenting them.

“But your number one is Layous-sama, isn’t it?”

“Ah, um... yes...”

Theia’s face gradually turned red. It was embarrassing that her mother knew about the boy she liked. Her voice also grew quieter. The girls could no longer hear her. She put her hands together and began fiddling with her fingers as she revealed her feelings to Elfaria.

“Thanks to him, I’ve... learned how to love...”

“I understand how you feel. What a wonderful love you’ve found.”

“Mother...”

Elfaria gently smiled as she listened, causing Theia to let out a sigh of relief. But as that relief washed over her, she picked up on something strange in what her mother had said.

If she understands how I feel... then that means...

A serious expression returned to Theia’s face as she stared straight at Elfaria. Though since Elfaria was much taller, she ended up looking up at her.

“Mother, could it be that you fell in love with Koutarou twenty years ago when you first met him?”

Elfaria shrank back for a second when confronted with Theia’s straightforward eyes and words. Her rich golden hair rustled ever so slightly, but she then smiled again and shook her head.

“Of course. He is the legendary Blue Knight after all.”

“That’s not what I meant... I mean as a man.”

Despite her mother’s answer, Theia wasn’t backing down. She was

already half-convinced. Elfaria had said, "I understand how you feel," and that wasn't for no reason. She was sure of it.

"There's no way. He's twenty years younger than me... Even if he's a legendary knight, he's not someone I could be in love with."

"I don't believe you! You are just forced to say that because of your position!"

"Theia..."

"Please tell me the truth! Mother, you're still in love with Koutarou, aren't you?!"

"That's..."

Elfaria stumbled for words and was unable to answer right away. A good half a minute passed before she could say anything at all.

"...Theia, you have nothing to worry about. My meeting with Layous-sama is a thing of the past. There is nothing between us now."

"Mother..."

In the end, Elfaria still avoided the question. But Theia took her long silence as a sign of the complex feelings she concealed within.

"Theia, you really are a kind girl..."

Elfaria gently embraced Theia, who was lost deep in thought. She was happy that her daughter was so considerate of her feelings. So much so that it brought a tear to her eye.

"It's only obvious for a daughter to wish for her mother's happiness."

"You're right... And I'm taking that all in right now."

"Mother..."

Theia embraced Elfaria right back. Hugging her mother like that was the natural thing to do, but it was oh-so wonderful. After maturing some, Theia knew just how special this moment was. And so, at least for the time being, she chose to ignore that Elfaria had avoided her question.

After getting some ramune and running up the path, Koutarou came to a stop when he reached the observation deck. There he saw Theia and Elfaria hugging each other.

"She is her mother after all, isn't she...?"

He had seen Elfaria and Theia together countless times, but this was the first time he'd ever seen Elfaria do something so motherly.

"Master, you're here."

Noticing Koutarou come to a stop, Ruth walked over to him. She also didn't want to get in the way of Elfaria and Theia's mother-daughter moment, so she took the opportunity to give them their space when Koutarou arrived.

"..."

However, despite Ruth walking right up to him, Koutarou stood

stock still and said nothing.

“Master?”

Confused, Ruth called out to him again. He finally seemed to notice her this time.

“Ah, Ruth-san.”

“Is something the matter?”

“Well, it’s nothing really... I was just surprised over something pretty obvious, thinking that Elle really has become a mother...”

Koutarou flashed a bittersweet smile as he handed Ruth one of the bottles of ramune. Graciously taking it from him, she took a good, long look at his face. She couldn’t imagine that all he was feeling was surprise.

“Master, you’re missing your late mother, aren’t you?”

“It’s hard to admit that as a man... but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t at least a little.”

Koutarou acknowledged Ruth’s suspicion honestly. Their relationship wasn’t shallow enough that he’d lie to her about his mother.

“Honestly, I’m a bit jealous of Theia.”

“I think that’s normal. There are times I too miss my parents on Forthorthe.”

“But it’s not cool, so would you mind not telling the others?”

“Of course not.”

Just as Ruth responded with a small smile and a nod, a sparkling flower blossomed in the sky with a loud bang. It only lasted for a couple of seconds before vanishing. While it might not have been the biggest, it was a comparatively large firework.

“Mother, it’s started!”

“My... the fireworks in this country really do look like flowers.”

With the night’s show beginning, Theia and Elfaria finally let go of each other and leaned on the handrail of the observation deck together to watch it unfold.

“Hey, Theia, Elle! I’ve brought your ramune!”

“You sure kept us waiting, Koutarou.”

“Sorry for the trouble, Layous-sama.”

Koutarou ran over to Theia and Elfaria. He’d given them their space while they were hugging, but the moment had passed now.

“You should be grateful, you two.”

“Yes, of course. I should be the only one in history to have the Blue Knight run errands for her.”

“What’s with that weird expression of gratitude?”

“I am always thankful for you, Layous-sama.”

“There’s definitely something behind that gratitude of yours.”

“Oh my.”

And just like that, Ruth watched as Koutarou began chatting away with Theia and Elfaria again. If everything went as Ruth wished, Koutarou and Theia would eventually marry and sights like this would become a daily occurrence. If that happened, Elfaria would become Koutarou's—

“Ah...”



That was when Ruth realized something.

“Could Her Majesty be...”

And that something was Elfaria’s true goal. Ruth suspected that perhaps Elfaria was trying to do something that none of the other girls around Koutarou could, and that she might have been trying to get Theia and Koutarou together for that sake. For if Theia and Koutarou were to marry, her relationship with him would change. She would become something to him that no one else could—a mother. That might be the best possible way to heal Koutarou’s heart. And only she had the ability to become someone special to Koutarou without becoming his lover or wife.

“But... to think...”

There was no definitive proof, but Ruth was convinced that it was something Elfaria might try. She certainly had the motive to.

The Secret Agreement at the Amusement Park

Monday, August 23rd

Unlike the girls of room 106 who were enjoying their summer vacation, Koutarou was busy with his part-time job. With the salary he received from Theia, there was actually no need for him to work at all. Tallying everything he'd received from her so far, he had funds enough to buy a small house.

But Koutarou had no intention of using that money for himself. He was saving it up to use for everyone when they went out together. In a way, he had trouble thinking of the money Theia gave him as actual money. It would feel weird to convert it into instant noodles and toilet paper. But he had no resistance to the idea of spending it so everyone could have fun. To him, it only seemed reasonable that the money he got from his relationship from Theia be spent on furthering his relationship with her and everyone else.

As such, Koutarou continued his part-time job despite having a vast fortune for a high school student. The girls laughed at him for being so earnest and awkward, but in truth, they loved that earnest and awkward side of his. They knew that his insisting on keeping his part-time job was ultimately a roundabout way of him caring for them. So they didn't try and stop him, but rather watched over him warmly.

"Koutarou, it's your turn."

"Okay."

Koutarou reached his hand out and threw the die before moving his own piece the number of spaces he'd rolled. He was currently playing a board game with Sanae, Yurika, Kiriha, and the two haniwas. Things had already wrapped up for the day and they were currently killing time before bed by playing a game.

"It says to draw an event card."

The objective of this particular board game was to escape from an old European manor. What happened inside the manor was determined by random event cards, and the space Koutarou had landed on said to draw one.

"Here you are."

"Thanks."

Koutarou drew a card from the pile of cards that Kiriha presented to him.

“What did you get?”

“Um... ‘You break down a wall and are attacked by a zombie. You can fend it off by discarding a weapon card. If you don’t discard, or can’t discard, you are chased around by the zombie and lose a turn.’”

“What will you do, ho?”

“Zombies are scary, ho!”

“I don’t have any weapon cards. Guess I’m sitting out a turn. Haaahh...”

Koutarou glanced at his hand and shook his head before letting out a loud yawn. It was getting late and he was exhausted from work, both of which were taking a toll on him.

“Karama-chan is next.”

“Brother, the die, ho!”

“Be careful, ho! There are monsters everywhere in this manor, ho!”

“Ho, ho!”

“The haniwas are really into this.”

“They’re probably happy because they usually only get to watch.”

After Koutarou’s turn, play passed from the haniwas to Yurika, to Kiriha, and then to Sanae before returning to him. But since he was losing a turn, he’d have to wait another whole round before play actually came back to him. And by the time his next turn actually rolled around...

“...”

“Hey, Koutarou.”

“Looks like he’s fallen asleep.”

“While exploring the manor, Koutarou lost to drowsiness, ho!”

“Not a bad way to go, ho!”

“I’m sure he’s tired. He’s working his part-time job and still playing with us.”

During the round he’d been forced to sit out, Koutarou had fallen asleep. Waking him up once he was out was no easy task, and the girls knew good and well why he’d passed out in the first place. That’s why no one in the room tried to rouse him.

“All right, Koutarou’s asleep, but let’s continue!”

“That’s more like it, ho!”

“This adventure isn’t over yet, ho!”

“With Satomi-san dropping out, last place automatically goes to him. Now I really want to keep going!”

The game continued then as if nothing happened. With Koutarou in such a deep sleep, waking him up would be hard work. That worked in their favor in that there was no fear of accidentally

disturbing him by being noisy if they kept playing.

“You guys keep going. I’ll properly put Koutarou to bed.”

“Okay! That means it’s Karama-chan’s turn again.”

“Ohoho, I will now show you my extraordinary luck, ho!”

“Karama, you’re extraordinarily lucky, ho?”

“It’s more exciting if I say I am, ho.”

“Then show them your luck Karama, ho!”

“The haniwas are getting more and more influenced by the manga and anime of the surface.”

Leaving the game to the haniwas, Sanae, and Yurika, Kiriha began tending to Koutarou. After laying down a futon by the wall, she dragged him over to it. He was out cold and offering no resistance, so it was easy enough to drag him along the grain of the tatami.

You’re completely defenseless right now... We’re invaders, you know? Aren’t you worried we’ll do something terrible?

Kiriha pulled a blanket over Koutarou and quietly watched his sleeping face. He looked totally relaxed and unwary. Seeing that, Kiriha smiled and gently stroked his cheek. She could feel his warmth through her palm. The sensation made her happy, and she continued stroking his cheek over and over.

What would you do if I were to kiss you while you slept? I’m one thing, but Kii doesn’t have that kind of restraint... Teehee...

While Koutarou was totally unguarded around the invaders, the invaders were deeply in love with him. Both sides were strange. Kiriha couldn’t help continuing to smile.

After putting Koutarou to bed, Kiriha returned to the tea table and rejoined the others. They then played out their game to its conclusion. First place was Sanae, second was Karama, third was Kiriha, fourth was Korama, fifth was Yurika, and sixth was Koutarou. Although, really, since Koutarou had ended up falling asleep and forfeiting by default, Yurika was actually the one who’d come in last place.

“Aww yeah! I’ll be sleeping great tonight!”

But despite her placement, Yurika was in a great mood. She was cheerily humming to herself as she opened the wardrobe and climbed up to her bed in the upper half. As it turned out, she’d had a good deal of fun with the night’s game. With Koutarou retiring, she’d been able to enjoy playing without worrying about getting last place. It was the ideal scenario for her.

“Nighty-night, everyone!”

And the cheerful Yurika was turning in early. Since she was the victim of unexpected misfortune on a daily basis, she’d started going to bed early whenever something good happened. That had become her life philosophy.

“Goodnight.”

But on the other hand, Sanae looked rather dissatisfied as she watched Yurika retire. Just looking at the two of them, anyone would have thought Sanae was the one who'd come in last place.

“What is it, Sanae?”

After Yurika closed the sliding door of the wardrobe, Kiriha called out to Sanae. She naturally grew concerned when the normally cheerful and innocent Sanae was making such a sour face.

“I was wondering how I should punish Koutarou for falling asleep and forgetting about me, the psychic beauty Sanae-chan.”

As it turned out, Sanae was unhappy about Koutarou. As far as she was concerned, it was his job to praise her whenever she got first place. Neglecting that obligation was no small offense in her mind.

“So, did you decide on what to do?”

“Yeah, I've decided to think about it tomorrow.”

“That's not deciding on anything. You're just putting off for later.”

“But it's boring to decide on something when Koutarou's sleeping.”

Really, Sanae just wanted Koutarou to dote on her. But he'd passed out, meaning that he wouldn't pay attention to her now no matter what she did.

“Well, it's not like I don't understand how you feel.”

Kiriha had a mischievous side to her, and she also found it dull that Koutarou had gone to sleep. But unlike Sanae, it was because she wanted to dote on Koutarou rather than the other way around.

“Well then, I'm going to turn in as well.”

“Okay. Goodnight, then.”

“Goodnight.”

After telling Kiriha goodnight, Sanae put on her favorite nightcap. Its design wasn't dissimilar from a Santa hat, and it fit the innocent and bright Sanae perfectly.

“Jeez, that Koutarou...”

Sanae continued to mutter complaints as she walked over to Koutarou, who was currently sleeping on his side.

“And... there we go.”

Sanae laid down in front of Koutarou, nestled her back up against his chest, and then pulled his arm over her.

“That should do it.”

After settling in, she nodded with satisfaction and closed her eyes. She wanted to sleep with Koutarou hugging her from behind. She used to sleep inside of him as a ghost, so this kind of intimate position felt natural to her now.

“I sometimes get envious of that innocent boldness of yours...”

“Did you say something?”

“No, nothing. Goodnight, Sanae.”

“Goodnight.”

Kiriha watched the two of them as she lifted up the tatami mat nearest the kitchen, and wondered how she might be able to do the same thing with Koutarou as she disappeared into the underground tunnel below.

The next morning, Ruth couldn't help smiling when she arrived in room 106. The reason for it was because she'd stumbled upon both Koutarou and Sanae sleeping sprawled out on the floor with their legs and arms in all directions. The two of them sleeping in the exact same position was quite humorous, but to Ruth, this was like a perfect mirror of their relationship.

After smiling at them for a moment, Ruth headed for the kitchen and began preparing breakfast. Shortly after, Sanae, who was sensitive to the presence of others, woke up. She sleepily rubbed her eyes and wandered into the kitchen.

“Good morning...”

“Good morning to you too.”

Figuring she was still sleepy on a midsummer morning like this, Ruth gave Sanae a glass of cold water as she greeted her.

“Here. For you, Sanae-sama.”

“Thank you, Ruth.”

“I see you stayed over last night.”

“Yeah. You know Koutarou— Ah, that's right!”

Sanae hurriedly drank down her water and ran back into the inner room. Her goal was to wake up Koutarou and give him a piece of her mind about last night.

“My...”

Surprised by the complete one-eighty in Sanae's attitude, Ruth stood there with a blank look on her face for a moment before giggling and returning to her work. The breakfast menu for today was ham, eggs, salad, miso soup, and rice.



Upon being roughly woken up by Sanae, Koutarou wasn't quite sure why she was angry at him. He had to listen to her for a bit before he realized what she was going on about.

"I'm sorry for falling asleep halfway through."

"That's not the point! I'm more concerned about you neglecting your most important job, which is praising me when I win!"

"That's your problem?!"

"What other problems could there be?"

"Normally, falling asleep in the middle of a game would be the real issue."

"But you've been tired lately, right? I'd just be being mean if I said you couldn't sleep."

"Then I can just praise you after the fact too, right?"

"No way! You spoiling me was a mission bestowed upon you by the heavens!"

"I don't really follow, but... congratulations on your victory. That's just what I'd expect from the beautiful and adorable Sanae-chan."

"Hmph, very well."

As he praised Sanae, Koutarou reached out to pat her on the head. Anticipating this, she leaned forward to make her head easier to reach. She loved their back and forth before getting pat on the head. It was her favorite game.

"Now, as an extra reward, you'll be taking me to the amusement park, you bastard!"

"Can't you ask normally?"

"I'm bored, so let's go play at the amusement park!"

"Just say that from the start, jeez. You really are a handful."

"Eeheehee!"

Sanae looked up at Koutarou with an embarrassed giggle and expectant eyes. It was one of Koutarou's weaknesses. He just couldn't refuse when she looked at him like that.

"Okay, okay. Let's go to the amusement park."

"Really?! Yeah! Thank you, Koutarou!"

"When do you want to go?"

"Today!"

"That's awfully sudden. Everyone might be busy."

"That's fine. We can just go again when everyone has time. It's not like it's the kind of place where one day is really enough, anyway."

"That's an optimistic outlook."

"It's Sanae-chan's motto to do fun things as many times as possible."

"Ha, okay. I can buy into that."

And so Koutarou agreed to take Sanae to the amusement park.

They'd also invite anyone else who was free to come along that day.

"Koutarou, Sanae, may I join you?"

Kiriha, who was sitting nearby, expressed her interest in going. The rollercoaster she so loved was at the amusement park. She loved nothing more than to ride it whenever she had the chance, so she wouldn't pass up this opportunity.

"Yeah, let's go together! It's more fun with more people! The haniwas should come too!"

"We'll come, ho! We'd be happy to, ho!"

"We don't have to hide there, so we love it, ho!"

Sanae heartily welcomed them all. While it might have been fun to go with just Koutarou, she wanted to have fun with as many people as possible. With Kiriha and the haniwas in tow, they'd have at least a party of five.

And as it turned out, Kiriha was the only other person who could go. Theia and Ruth were busy, Yurika had already been abducted by the cosclub for the day, Shizuka and Maki had made plans to hang out with some classmates, and Clan had scheduled a checkup for Harumi. So in the end, it was just Koutarou, Sanae, Kiriha, and the haniwas after all.

"Since it's just us, I've decided to pad out the numbers."

"Sanae-chan, one of us is enough."

After leaving the apartment, Sanae-chan left her body and was floating in the air alongside the haniwas. It was her way of being considerate, but it was a trial for the poor, shy Sanae-san.

"You need to get used to this already."

"That's impossible... You're always taking the courage with you, Sanae-chan."

"Well, that's because it's mine. You need to muster up your own. Stop relying on me."

"But..."

Having only known Koutarou and the others for a short while, Sanae-san still wasn't sure how to act around them. On top of that, Sanae-chan's extroverted personality was usually the dominant one. Even with her memories as a reference, the introverted Sanae-san hardly knew what to do with them. She was still getting a feel for things.

"Koutarou, how about you hold Sanae-san's hand?"

"That's it! Thank you, Kiriha! We should just force her to get used to it!"

"Whaaat?!"

The Sanaes were split on Kiriha's proposal. Sanae-chan was all for it, but Sanae-san was against it. The difference in their personalities

was showing.

“So... what should I do?”

This, of course, troubled Koutarou. While he had no objections to holding Sanae’s hand, he didn’t just want to ignore how Sanae-san felt.

“Koutarou, Koutarou! It’s not like she doesn’t like you! She’s me, after all!”

“Eeeeeek! Stop it, Sanae-chan!”

“She likes you so she’s just embarrassed to hold hands. Isn’t she childish?”

“You look more like the child to me though...”

Since they were two halves of the same whole, Sanae-chan and Sanae-san shared their senses, memories, and basic personality traits. That’s why both of them liked Koutarou. But in the time they’d spent apart, they’d gradually developed different ways of expressing those things.

“So there you have it! Just grab her hand!”

“N-No way!”

“Do you hate Koutarou, Sanae-san?”

“That’s not it, but... it’s still too early! We’ve only known each other for a few months!”

“You’re so immature... Jeez...”

Their temperaments were so different that Sanae was amazed by herself.

“I’ve come up with a good idea, Sanae.”

“What?”

“How about you hold Karama and Korama’s hands first? I’m sure that’ll be a lot easier than starting off with the person you love the most.”

“We’ll cooperate, ho!”

“But don’t fall for us, ho!”

Karama and Korama spun around Sanae-san. Since they adored Sanae, they were happy to help her.

“I-In that case, I might manage somehow...”

“Fine, so be it... Please lend us a hand, haniwas.”

“Leave it to us, ho!”

“We’re full of love, ho!”

Karama and Korama each floated over to grab one of Sanae-san’s hands. They then concealed themselves using their built-in cloaking, but Sanae-san could still feel their tiny hands in hers.

“All right, I’ll do my best...”

If she kept being so withdrawn, she would never be able to leave Sanae-chan’s shadow. That would become an obstacle if the two of them were to completely merge, so Sanae-san decided to try her

hardest today.

Koutarou and the others took the train to their destination for the day. As they approached the ocean, the first thing they could see along the coastline was the ferris wheel. The biggest attraction of them all of course stood out the most. But next after that, they spied the rollercoaster Kiriha was so particularly fond of.

“That reminds me, Koutarou. We made a promise to ride the rollercoaster after the commotion underground settled down.”

Spotting the rollercoaster through the train window, Kiriha smiled at Koutarou. Just before the decisive battle with the radical faction, Koutarou had promised the nervous Kiriha that they would ride the rollercoaster when everything was all over. Those words had supported Kiriha during the fight. She’d held on to them all this time, and she wasn’t planning on leaving the amusement park today without getting to ride the coaster.

“I remember. That’s what I was thinking about the moment the amusement park came up.”

Of course Koutarou hadn’t forgotten. He was a knight of his word. Especially when it came to those who were special to him, like the girls of room 106.

“Koutarou, real men always keep their promises.”

Sanae who had listened in on the conversation poked Koutarou with her elbow, with a mannerism as if to say that those who don’t fulfill their promises are the worst.

“Trust me. I’m there.”

“All right! Karama-chan, Korama-chan, we’re going to ride the rollercoaster!”

“I can’t wait, ho!”

“I love going up and down and round and round, ho!”

“You’re more interested in riding it yourself than in me keeping my promise...”

Sanae and the cloaked haniwas rejoiced. It might have been a strange sight to anyone else, but not to Koutarou and Kiriha. Sanae and the haniwas began then discussing the attractions as they stared out the window, and Kiriha turned back to Koutarou.

“By the way, Koutarou...”

Since she only wanted Koutarou to hear what she was about to say, she spoke in a quiet, almost whispering voice.

“Hmm?”

“When we went there last year... Do you remember the other promise we made?”

“Last year? What was it again?”

“Heh, you really are unconcerned with promises others make...”

Koutarou always tried to make good on his promises, but he didn't demand the same from others. The girls had helped him realize that was because he didn't expect things from others, but that was a habit he was trying to break.

"I'm trying to be careful, but it's not that easy."

"Back then, I promised you that in return for helping me find my first love, I would introduce you to a cute underground girl."

"Ah, that's right. I do remember you saying something like that."

Koutarou recalled coming out to the park with Kiriha last year. He'd struck a deal with her to help cheer her up. Kiriha had agreed, and a promise was made. But since Koutarou had only done it to help Kiriha, he'd quickly forgotten about the rest.

"Now is the time to fulfill that promise."

"What? But I don't really—"

"Need that" is what Koutarou was about to say. He already had Kiriha, Sanae, and several other girls precious to him. There was no need to introduce him to someone else. But before he could finish saying that, Kiriha placed her slender finger on his lips, preventing him from continuing.

"I'll be introducing you to the daughter of the Kurano family. Since the Kurano family is a distinguished family with over a thousand-year history, she should be perfect for you."

"Hey, isn't that—"

Koutarou's eyes opened wide. The Kurano family only had one daughter, and that was Kiriha herself. Now, after she'd found her first love and the chaos underground had been settled, she'd decided to introduce herself.

"Her name is Kurano Kiriha. She's seventeen years old, just like you. Even if it's just as friends, I hope the two of you live happily ever after."

Kiriha smiled innocently. It was as if she really was introducing him to a friend.

"Kiriha-san..."

"Yes?"

Kiriha slightly inclined her head, resting it on Koutarou's shoulder. The gesture was incredibly natural, as if it was something she'd been doing for years. Seeing her like that, Koutarou swallowed his own words.

"It's nothing... I was just thinking that since you've introduced us, I should get along well with her."

"I'd be happy if you do. It'll mean going to the trouble of introducing you two was worth it."

"You would... go that far for me, huh?"

"I love you, after all. Or is that not reason enough?"

“...No, it’s probably my own fault I’m confused.”

Koutarou still didn’t fully understand his own heart. It was no longer a question that the girls of room 106 were precious to him, but his wounded heart was fighting him at every step. He was so deeply cut off from his feelings that he was still denying them at times like this.

“That’s enough with the serious talk, Koutarou. Today we should play to our hearts’ content before we go home.”

“Yeah, let’s!”

Yet slowly and surely, those wounds were beginning to heal. He was happy just knowing there were people who would go out of their way for him.

Upon arriving at the amusement park, Koutarou and the girls chose one end to start at and made their way to the other, riding every single ride they came across along the way. Since there was no reason to rush through the entire park in one day, they took their time and rode everything. There were only two attractions they were dead set on getting to: the rollercoaster they’d all talked about before, and the Kabutonga feature they’d never be able to visit with Ruth around.

“Neo Scarab King sure was strong. But there’s no way my Kabutonga would lose.”

“It’s our and Sanae-chan’s victory, ho!”

“Friendship comes out victorious, ho!”

“Well done, Hercules, Atlas!”

“Ho!”

“Ho, ho!”

Koutarou and the others had just finished with the Kabutonga attraction, “Kabutonga: The Ride.” It was an interactive ride where you got in a moving car headed to assault the enemy base, and shot enemies that popped up along the way. It was one of the most popular attractions at the park.

They’d split up into two cars: Kiriha and Koutarou in one and Sanae and the haniwas in another. They’d competed by comparing final scores, and Sanae and the haniwas had stolen the show. Sanae’s psychic powers gave her superhuman reflexes, and the haniwas were able to show off the power of state-of-the-art spiritual energy technology. Working together, they’d easily achieved the day’s high score.

“Looks like we lost, Koutarou.”

“I’m afraid there’s no helping that. In the end, you and I are just ordinary people that can move a little fast.”

While Koutarou and Kiriha had lost, they weren’t unhappy with their results. Sanae had beat them, but they were still the second

placing team on the scoreboard. That was a victory in its own right. They'd only fallen behind because they were up against an exceptional opponent.

"I have objections to you calling yourself ordinary."

"Well, that goes both ways."

"Our talents couldn't be fully utilized in a simple firefight."

"I guess that's true."

Kiriha was a tactical genius and Koutarou had some skill with a blade. Neither of them were cut out for gunfights from vehicles. Especially not with the enemy attacking in waves.

"You've got it all wrong! We didn't win because of special powers or skills."

"We didn't, ho!"

"You don't get it, ho!"

"Our victory comes from our hearts filled with justice and the bonds of friendship!"

"Justice, ho!"

"Friendship, ho!"

Sanae and the haniwas were cheerfully walking in front of Koutarou and Kiriha. Their prize for winning was getting to decide what ride everyone went on next, and they were headed straight for the haunted house. It was another ride that would send groups of two through a spooky mansion.

"Sanae, let's change up the teams again."

"Okay. You were with Kiriha last time, so I'll go with her this time."

"Let's do our best, Sanae."

"Yeah!"

"Koutarou, now that it's come to this, you are our only hope, ho!"

"The monsters at the haunted house don't show up on our sensors! And they jump out of nowhere, so they're scary, ho!"

"...That's a surprising weakness you guys have."

On attractions where the whole group couldn't ride together, they'd been splitting up. But having the same partners all day would be boring, so they'd been rotating after each ride. After the Kabutonga attraction and the ride before, it was now Kiriha and Sanae's turn to pair off, which meant Koutarou was with the haniwas. With that settled, the five of them headed to the haunted house.

Unlike the Kabutonga ride, the haunted mansion was dark. Karama and Korama didn't need to conceal themselves, so they took up their positions to the left and right of Koutarou.

"Koutarou, there it is, ho!"

"Save us, ho!"

They were clinging to him and trembling. Unlike normal ghosts, they couldn't sense the animatronic ones that were part of the attraction. Scared, they'd been holding on to Koutarou since the ride started.

"Like I said, that's not a real ghost."

"We know that, ho! It's not about logic, ho!"

"It's the same as being afraid of heights, ho! You don't just stop being scared in a high place even if you have a lifeline, ho!"

"I kinda get what you mean... All right, just leave it to me."

"You're so reliable, ho!"

"Brother!"

Koutarou and the haniwas had a rather lively ride through the haunted house. In contrast, things with Sanae and Kiriha in the car behind them were quite quiet.

"Say, Kiriha, how is that being projected into the air?"

"It's probably being displayed on a diagonal, transparent glass panel, and that doll is probably drawn behind it."

"I see. So with a human shape reflected off of the glass, it looks like a real ghost."

"Exactly."

Having been a ghost herself not all that long ago, the prospect of a haunted house didn't scare Sanae at all. But since she still loved surprises, this kind of attraction was still right up her alley. Moreover, this would serve as good inspirational fuel for pranks she could pull when she left her body. So for those two reasons, Sanae was quite fascinated by the haunted house. Since the beginning of the ride, she'd been asking Kiriha how each of the tricks worked.

"Um, Kiriha..."

But just after they reached the halfway point of the ride, the tone of Sanae's voice dropped a little. Kiriha could tell from the change that she was about to ask her about something else altogether.

"What is it?"

"Can I ask you about something since it's just the two of us right now?"

"I don't mind."

"Thanks."

Sanae wore a serious expression quite unlike her usual self. She looked much more like Sanae-san than Sanae-chan right now.

"Um, Kiriha, do you like Koutarou?"

"Yes, I love him."

In response to Sanae's reserved question, Kiriha gave a clear answer. She seemed perfectly in her element. If anything at all changed in her expression, it was the hint of gentleness deep within her eyes.

“How much?”

“Most likely as much as you do.”

“I see... Yeah, you would...”

Sanae nodded, seemingly convinced. She'd suspected that was the case. Before she'd realized it, the aura that Kiriha directed towards Koutarou was no longer just the love of a friend. That was proof enough that they shared the same feelings for Koutarou.

“But, Kiriha...”

“Hmm?”

“If that's true, won't it become a problem in the future?”

“The possibility for that is quite high.”

In what would likely be the distant future, Koutarou's wounded heart would eventually heal. When that happened, he would finally be able to love people back. In all likelihood, he would choose someone to be his lover and they would eventually marry. The problem was that he could only choose one person, and there were two girls here that loved him dearly. Sanae and Kiriha both knew that would inevitably spell trouble down the line.

“Do you think you could give up, Kiriha?”

“That would be hard. I probably couldn't do it. What about you?”

“I don't think I could either. I don't want to imagine a future where I'm not with Koutarou...”

Koutarou had already become an important part of both girls' lives. Having him forcibly torn away from them would be beyond painful. They both wanted to avoid that, but the chance of it happening at some point in the future wasn't small.

“Then, Kiriha, why don't we make a promise?”

“A promise?”

“Yeah. That there won't be any grudges, regardless of whether Koutarou chooses me or you. In exchange, the one not chosen is allowed to have an affair with Koutarou.”

“That's an interesting proposal...”

What Sanae was suggesting was fairly simple. Kiriha was currently trying to invade Koutarou's life while taking the utmost care not to destroy anything, and it seemed Sanae had arrived at a similar plan. And since she was trying to make an ideal arrangement for both of them, it was a very interesting proposition to Kiriha.

“Since this is Koutarou we're talking about, that affair would probably be just as serious.”

“I don't know about that. He's an awkward man, after all.”

“So, what do you say, Kiriha? Is it a promise?”

Sanae mustered her courage to quiet her unease and boldly asked Kiriha for an answer. Since this was a question that would greatly affect their futures, she wasn't asking with her usual cheerful smile.

The desperation in her eyes was shining through.

“It’s a promise.”

“Really?!”

“It’s certainly not a bad deal for me.”

“Thank you, Kiriha!”

The moment Kiriha agreed, a smile returned to Sanae’s face as she sighed and relaxed her shoulders. Waiting for an answer had been one of the tensest moments of her life, and she felt overwhelming relief now that it was all over.

“Hahh, thank god... With this, there’s no need to worry about Kiriha for now...”

“We’ll eventually need to bring this up with everyone.”

“Yeah, you’re right. That might be for the best.”

Kiriha and Sanae weren’t the only ones that cared for Koutarou, and the other girls who did were irreplaceable to both Kiriha and Sanae. They wanted to avoid any scenario that would compromise their friendship. And to that end, Sanae’s promise would be a safe bet.

“Perhaps, but I think we should aim for the opposite.”

“The opposite?”

“Rather than facilitating Koutarou choosing someone, I think we make it so he can’t choose anyone.”

“Can’t choose anyone...? What do you mean?”

“It means getting even closer to Koutarou than we are now. If we all do that, it’ll make it impossible for him to choose one of us over the others.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“Normally someone would settle on a partner before things got to that point, but because of Koutarou’s past trauma, he’s deferring that choice. So we should all deepen our relationships with him before the time comes that he’s forced to make it.”

“How should we do that?”

“There’s no special way. We only need to remain our bright and energetic selves. Just by doing that, our invasion will advance to the next stage.”

“Heehee, I’m sure Koutarou’s in for a lot of trouble.”

Sanae flashed a small smile. She normally had no intention of bothering Koutarou, but compromises would have to be made for the sake of everyone’s happiness. She needed him to be troubled over this.

“Indeed, he’s a very serious man. If things go according to plan, he’s in for a world of trouble.”

“But that’s just what we want. I bet everything would be a lot more fun together.”

“Fortunately, we are invaders. It’s been our job to trouble Koutarou since we first arrived.”

“Let’s do our best to invade.”

“Agreed.”

With their secret discussion over, Sanae and Kiriha exchanged smiles. A year and four months had already passed since the girls first began their invasion, and they were finally about to get serious. However, this time, it would be a large-scale joint invasion.

“Koutarou, save us, ho!”

“Waaah! If we’re important to you, do your best to protect us, ho!”

“Calm down already! Nothing bad is actually going to happen!”

“You don’t know that, ho!”

“Don’t be so irresponsible, ho!”

“Ho—waaah!”

And Koutarou was none the wiser. He had no clue of the frightening plans being conspired upon by the invaders in the car behind him. He had no idea that what he was only vaguely starting to realize for himself was about to become full-fledged reality.

When Koutarou and the girls left the haunted house, they were bathed in the red light of the evening sun. It was just about to set, meaning it was time to start thinking about going home.

“Kiriha, the day is almost over,” remarked Sanae.

“Then we should head back soon,” Kiriha replied.

“All right, then let’s hit one last ride before we go.”

“You’re right, let’s do just that.”

“Come on, Koutarou.”

“O-Okay...”

Before Koutarou and the girls left the park, they would enjoy one final attraction. While no one had mentioned its name, they all instinctively began heading for the same place. They already knew exactly where they were going.

“Koutarou, we’ve decided to follow you, ho!”

“Ane-san was right, ho! You’re a really dependable man, ho!”

“Th-Thanks? I’m glad I was of use.”

“What a modest man, ho!”

“As expected of Big Brother, ho!”

“It sounds like Koutarou and the haniwas are getting along better.”

“Something must have happened at the haunted house.”

“Eeheehee, just like it did with us.”

“Heh, looks like it.”

The group of five cheerfully chatted away as they headed for the ride in question. They eventually approached a huge, towering structure. It was a line of metal tracks supported by a strong frame.

On top of it were metallic cars that flew along the rails at frightening speeds. It was the ever-popular rollercoaster.

“Kiriha, we should go too.”

“Yes, let’s.”

About a hundred meters away from the rollercoaster terminal, Sanae and Kiriha smiled and nodded at each other before running up to Koutarou.

“Koutarou, Koutarou!”

“Got you!”

They came at him from different sides and each grabbed one of his arms, pressing themselves up against him. Sanae had his right and Kiriha had his left, and they snuggled right up to him like lovers.

“H-Hey...”

Koutarou was confused by the girls’ sudden actions. He stood there wide-eyed and at a loss for words, unsure what to do.

“Aren’t you lucky, Koutarou? You get to have two cute girls with you!”

“Nobody is looking, so you can do as you please, Koutarou.”

“Wow, Kiriha, you’re so bold!”

“You guys... What’s up with you all of a sudden?”

Koutarou couldn’t hide his surprise over Sanae and Kiriha acting like this at the same time. While they had done similar things individually in the past, this was their first ever coordinated attack.

“Nothing’s up at all. Kiriha and I both just love you.”

“This is what’s normal. Or is our relationship so shallow that you can’t accept something like this?”

“Well, that’s not it but...”

Koutarou’s relationship with Sanae and Kiriha was far from shallow. Up until now, the girls had just been holding back for the sake of each other. But with their new promise, there was no longer any need for that. There wasn’t anyone else around right now, so they didn’t need to hide how they felt, either.

Something must’ve happened between them...

That was the conclusion Koutarou came to as he looked at them. They had to have come to some sort of agreement and coordinated this. Before today, they’d always made sure to give each other plenty of room and not step on each other’s toes. As Koutarou was contemplating what might have changed that, the haniwas hugged his head from each side.

“Koutarou, get along better with us too, ho!”

“We don’t want to be left out, ho!”

The haniwas were so noisy that they interrupted his train of thought completely. He wouldn’t get to the bottom of things anytime soon.



“We can’t lose to them, Kiriha!”

“Then how about this, Koutarou?”

“H-Hey! Stop clinging to me!”

“Now, now! We know you’re happy.”

“Koutarou is surprisingly innocent and shy.”

“You’re just playing around!”

“Ah, he’s found us out.”

“As expected of Koutarou.”

“Ho!”

“Ho, ho!”

The noisy group of five continued their back and forth as they disappeared through the gate to the rollercoaster. They still had some time left before the sun set, and they would enjoy every last minute of their day together.

Ending Summer and Neverending Homework

Monday, August 30th

The bomb was dropped on August 30th.

“I-I forgot my homework!”

Said bomb was Yurika’s summer homework. Like every other high schooler, she’d been given assignments to complete over summer break—of which there were only two more days. Completing all of her assignments now before school started up again seemed nigh impossible.

“Please help me, Satomi-san! I haven’t done any of my homework!”

“Wait a minute, Yurika, you’ve been studying every day! What have you been doing all this time?!”

“The workbooks and drills you bought for me! It’s because I was studying every day that I forgot I had homework to do!”

“Whaaat?!”

Yurika had indeed overlooked her summer homework in the midst of her everyday studying. Not long ago, she’d decided to get serious about her studies all around. She wanted to go to the same university as Koutarou and Harumi. And with a clear goal in mind, a fire was lit inside her. Since she seemed motivated about school for the first time in her life, Koutarou had been helping to tutor her. He wasn’t the best student himself, but Yurika was so incompetent and far behind that even his help made a huge difference.

After a lot of hard work, Yurika had finally made it to studying material that was just a few grade levels below where she should be. Koutarou’s thought was that she’d never succeed without a good understanding of the basics, so he’d started at the very beginning and had her work her way up from there. Yurika was taking this tutoring very seriously and studied every day. Thanks to that, she was improving in several subjects and was in a much better scholastic position than she’d been the year before.

However, it also proved to be a pitfall. Since she was studying so hard every day, nobody had realized that she hadn’t gotten started on her homework—not even Yurika herself. In working through all the exercises Koutarou had given her, she became convinced she’d done

her homework too somewhere along the line. But when she went into her book bag to get ready for a new semester of school, she found all her homework worksheets completely blank.

“Please help me, Satomi-san!”

“I want to help, but... I still haven’t finished mine, either.”

In regards to this failure, Yurika wasn’t completely at fault. She’d been studying like a good student, so it wasn’t like she’d been slacking off. It would be cruel to blame her for a simple miss when she had been studying so ardently. Koutarou would love to help, but he still hadn’t completed his own homework.

“Just start working on it for now. I’ll come help once I’m done with mine.”

“Please do... You’re my only hope right now, Satomi-san.”

And so, all alone, Yurika began the difficult undertaking of completing her summer vacation in just two days.

The time on the clock was two days, and the mountain of homework before her was all untouched. Her only lifeline, Koutarou, had his hands full with his own homework. It was really looking hopeless for Yurika right now. A year ago she probably would have broken out into tears right about now. It would just be easier to get yelled at by the teacher than to finish all of her homework in time. But that wasn’t the kind of student she was now. She worked through the tears in her eyes, solving one math problem after another. She could just copy someone else’s homework, but she wouldn’t learn anything that way. Ever since she’d set her heart on going to the same university as Koutarou and Harumi, she’d stopped slacking off and cheating when it came to things that really mattered.

“Um, if you hit your pocket and split a cookie into two... If you then continue hitting it once every ten seconds, that’s six times in one minute. The problem says ten minutes, so that’s a total of sixty times. Which means... um, the cookies increase by sixty, so... a total of sixty-one? But... That’s a lot of cookies, but it doesn’t seem like it’s enough... Augh, I know I’m getting something wrong, but I don’t know what!”

Yurika was currently puzzling her way through her math homework. She was bad at math as it was, and even worse with word problems. She had no idea what she needed to calculate here. This took the kind of problem-solving skills that people needed in their everyday lives, which Yurika was shockingly lacking.

“Yurika, how about I improve how fast you can think? My indigo magic is good at that kind of thing. I can help.”

Seeing Yurika struggle, Maki offered to lend a helping hand. She was her ally this time. Maki was impressed with Yurika’s recent efforts

in her studies, so she didn't think a little magical assistance would do any harm.

"I can't do that. I'm a magical girl of Rainbow Heart, so I can't use magic for my own gain."

It was an attractive proposition, but Yurika shook her head. The personal use of magic went against Rainbow Heart's commandments, so Maki's plan wasn't an option for her.

"That may be, but everything will be for nothing if you flunk now, right?"

"That's true, but... people don't really grow if all they do is work around their problems rather than through them. And I want to graduate on my power alone."

What sustained Yurika even more than her pride as a magical girl of Rainbow Heart was her promise with Koutarou. She would devote herself to studying and graduate high school with grades good enough to get into university with him and Harumi. She had, for the first time in her life, decided to live like a normal girl. And to that end, she couldn't cheat. If she did, she wouldn't learn. Besides, when it came to the really important things in life, cheating wasn't an option. If she just worked through things the hard way, it eventually wouldn't be so hard anymore. Yurika was now well aware of that.

"That's the spirit, Yurika-chan!"

Thinking back to all her karate training as a child, Shizuka was impressed with Yurika's resolve. Martial arts couldn't be learned in a day. Taking the hard way was the fastest way to become strong. Rather than focusing on big, powerful, or acrobatic moves, just repeatedly practicing basic moves built a stronger foundation and was more meaningful down the line. The true mark of a master was that they didn't fear taking the long, hard road. And looking at it that way, Yurika had made the right decision. Shizuka was proud of her.

"That said, let me know when you get stuck, okay? I think giving some hints would be okay."

"Thank you very much!"

With a refreshed expression, Yurika got back to her homework. Watching all this unfold, Maki was stunned. Yurika was like a completely different person from the girl she'd known a year ago.

"To think this is the same Yurika who only ever used to run away..."

"Everyone grows up. A lot's happened over the past year, after all. Haven't you changed too, Aika-san? You're actually worrying about Yurika-chan right now, you know."

"I... You might be right."

Hearing Shizuka say that, Maki slowly nodded. It was strange to her that she was gradually beginning to understand love, but she was

certain that it was helping her grow. As proof of that, she smiled at Shizuka.

With Shizuka and Maki's support and a few hints from time to time, Yurika was smoothly working her way through her homework. However, she had a long way to go. A normal person could only maintain high levels of concentration for an hour or so at a time, but she'd need a lot longer than that to get it all done. After hitting the hour mark, her concentration gradually waned and her mind downshifted to a lower gear. She was now solving problems at half the speed she was when she first started. Yet she pressed on, trying to fend off the desire to cry and run away from her problems. She knew she had to work through this

"I-I can't... My head isn't working anymore..." she eventually muttered as she collapsed on the tea table.

Her tank was completely empty after about three hours. She'd had a good run, but she was still only a quarter of the way through her homework. If she gave up here, she'd never get it all done. It would be scoldings galore once the semester started.

Seeing her in this sorry state, Shizuka paused the movie she was watching and tried to encourage the collapsed Yurika.

"Yurika-chan, if you don't finish your homework, you'll regret it."

"I know that, but my brain is totally fried. I tried giving myself a pep talk a couple of times, but I can't even think straight anymore."

Yurika knew good and well what lay ahead of her. The longer she did nothing, the tighter the noose got around her neck. But despite her wishes, her frazzled and exhausted brain wasn't cooperating with her.

"Frankly, it's just too much work for two days."

Maki, who had been watching the movie with Shizuka, shrugged. No matter how she looked at it, there was simply more homework than Yurika was capable of dealing with. It was an impossible challenge without magic.

"Yeah! Maki-chan's right! I'll fill in as many answers as I can and give up on the rest. I'll just have to endure the teacher getting angry!"

Having lost all willpower, Yurika latched on to what Maki said and raised the white flag. It wasn't like Yurika had ignored her homework on purpose, and she'd even made a good faith effort in trying to get it done. She'd tried her best, but it just wasn't going to happen. She was already thinking about how she should apologize to her teacher.

"What do we do now, Aika-san?"

"It would be easy to just let her give up here..."

"But I do want to her to finish her homework. For her own good."

"Then should we go call him in?"

“Yeah, that’s all we can do.”

Shizuka and Maki nodded at each other. The situation was already out of their hands, so they decided to call for backup. They knew there was only one person who could motivate Yurika now.

Shizuka and Maki had gone out to call for Koutarou. He was with Clan, borrowing her advice and equipment for his final piece of homework, his report. But upon hearing of Yurika’s situation he paused his own work and returned to room 106.

“Yurika, wake up.”

“Shatomi-shan... I can’t go on... I did my best...”

Yurika showed Koutarou her partially completed homework. Only a quarter of it was done. Considering her intelligence and the time spent, she really had worked hard.

“Are you going to give up here?”

“Yes... I’ll just have to endure the teacher yelling at me...”

The exhausted Yurika had tears of resignation in her eyes. This wasn’t the way she’d wanted things to end, but she’d hit her limit.

“I see. So that means you’re free now, right?”

“Well, yes... but I don’t want to move...”

Drained and defeated, Yurika was leaning over the tea table in a dazed state. She looked sad and tired, the complete opposite of how she’d been at the outset of this endeavor.

“You don’t have to move, just come along with me.”

“What are you doing...?”

“We’re gonna play some professional wrestling. There’s a couple of new moves I wanted to try. You don’t have to do anything though. Just hold still. That should be easy since you’re tired and all.”

“Nooooo!”

The moment Koutarou brought up wrestling, Yurika sat bold upright and adamantly shook her head, her hair fluttering this way and that behind her.

“Why not? You’ve got free time since you’re done with your homework, right?”

“No! I’ve decided to continue with my homework!”

“I see... Sorry to bother you then.”

It looked like Yurika was about to be forcibly be dragged into play wrestling, but Koutarou backed out without any contest. Seeing her chance, Yurika pressed on further.

“That’s right! I have the important job of finishing my homework!”

Wrestling was something that should be done at the start of a long weekend, not just before the start of a new semester.

“All right, then just let me know when you’re tired of doing

homework.”

“I won’t get tired!”

“Knowing you, you’ll lose your motivation soon enough.”

“I won’t lose my motivation! I’m going to be busy doing homework all day and tomorrow!”

“But I wanted to try all of these new moves out. We could go all day.”

“I refuse! If you understand, then get out of here already! You’re keeping me from my homework!”

“Okay, okay. But if you get tired of your homework—”

“I said I won’t get tired!”

After firmly rejecting Koutarou’s terrifying offer, Yurika got back to her math homework. She looked like a soldier fighting for her life on the battlefield, and was solving problems as quickly as she had when she first got started.

Even after Koutarou left, Yurika continued furiously working away on her homework. If she tried to cut any corners, Koutarou would come back with a vengeance and make her his practice dummy. And that was exactly what she wanted to avoid. Being a coward, she was sensitive to danger.

“Man, Satomi-kun is amazing...”

Seeing Yurika working on her homework with such zeal, Shizuka let out an astonished sigh. She’d thought motivating her again would be a herculean task, but Koutarou had done it in a matter of seconds and then disappeared just as quickly as he’d come. He handled Yurika with unbelievable ease.

“Satomi-kun knows us better than anyone... If any of us were in Yurika’s position, I’m sure he would be able to motivate us just as easily.”

“Yeah, I bet.”

Shizuka knew Maki was right. She’d experienced his uplifting power firsthand. Koutarou had been the one to cheer her up when she was visiting her parents’ graves and feeling lonely.

“He really treasures us, doesn’t he? It’s like a dream...”

“He sure does... I’m so grateful I was able to meet someone like him.”

All the girls of room 106 had had similar experiences to Shizuka’s. That’s how they knew Koutarou would cheer them up and on if they ever lost heart.

Yurika’s fear of Koutarou’s wrestling moves was strong, and fear motivated her to continue desperately toiling away at her homework. It was her only defense. However, a few hours after restarting on her

homework, Yurika was reaching her limits again.

It wasn't long before a loud thud echoed through the room.

"Kyaaaah! Y-Yurika?!"

Maki was in the middle of watching a scary movie with Shizuka, so Yurika collapsing again startled her quite badly and she reflexively let out a rather adorable scream.

"Oooooo..."

Yurika had fallen over on her back and her eyes were spinning. Last time she'd come to a stop because of mental fatigue, but this time it was completely physical. She'd spent every last ounce of her strength, and this was the result.

"Aaaaaah..."

"Aika-san, what should we do?"

"Hmm... Let's call Satomi-kun again."

"I'm not sure even he can do anything this time..."

"But I still think he should see how hard Yurika tried."

"You're right."

The two girls nodded at each other and decided to call for aid again. Koutarou was currently aboard Clan's Hazy Moon, so they headed for the transportation gate on the innermost wall of the room. As they approached, the wall began glowing blue.

"Please take us to Clan-san's place."

In response to Maki's voice, the gate turned from blue to orange. In order to make it easy to use, the gate was color coded. Blue was for Blue Knight, and orange was for Hazy Moon. Additionally, the Higashihongan estate was purple and the Sakuraba household was white.

"I've started getting used to this crazy science..."

The transporter was utterly mysterious to Shizuka, but she'd come to accept it as part of her everyday life. Just a little over a year ago, she'd been a perfectly average high school girl. But now she felt like she was living as a character out of some sci-fi novel.

"You have?"

"You mean you haven't, Aika-san?"

"I'm a magician, you know."

"Ah, right. I completely forgot."

"Then please just put it out of your mind altogether."

"Heehee, sure. You bet."

Maki and Shizuka both wanted the same thing. They'd try and stay the same no matter what power they held or what craziness befell them. And so, two ordinary high school girls jumped through the gate with smiles on their faces.

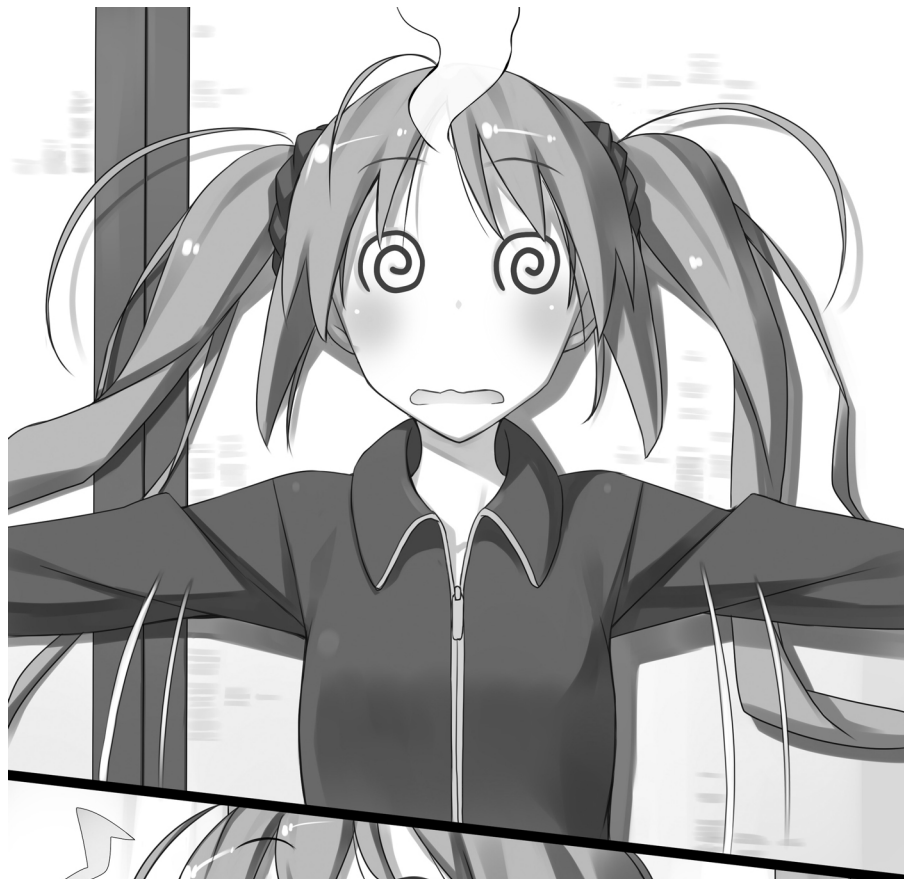
Yurika's eyes were still spinning when Maki and Shizuka brought

Koutarou back to room 106. He picked her up and gently laid her down on the tatami mat away from the table with a gentle, calm look in his eyes.

“You did good, Yurika...”

Yurika had pushed herself so far past her mental limit that she'd reached her physical limit. While she still hadn't finished her homework, her efforts were praiseworthy. She'd literally done everything in her power. She hadn't reached the goal, but she certainly hadn't abandoned it. Yurika had valiantly performed her duties.

“What should we do, Satomi-kun?”



Though she was envious of Yurika for getting her head pat by Koutarou, Maki consulted with him about the next steps to take. Determining what should be done with Yurika was an important issue.

“For starters, let’s have her rest a little.”

“At this rate, she’ll get fussed at by the teacher. She’s already at risk of having to repeat a year...”

Shizuka anxiously looked over at Yurika. She was constantly late to school and missing homework assignments. Before the summer vacation, the teacher warned her that if she kept it up, she’d be repeating a year. So not turning in her summer homework could be dangerous.

“After some rest, I’m sure she’ll regain some energy and push on for a little longer.”

“I hope so...”

Shizuka doubted Yurika had any more homework potential left in her. She couldn’t imagine that she had anything left in her at all after exhausting herself like that.

“Don’t worry, Landlord-san. Yurika’s the kind of girl that will pull through when she has too.”

However, Koutarou firmly believed in Yurika, and it showed in his eyes.

Yurika’s eyes opened as the smell of her favorite food tickled her nose. Nothing else would have been able to wake her up.

“I smell ramen!”

Indeed, what had called her back to the world of the living was instant noodles. The aroma of the artificial seasoning stimulated her appetite and blew away her drowsiness. She was wide awake within just a few seconds of smelling it.

“Thank you for the foood!”

Yurika snatched the instant noodles from the tea table and skillfully separated the disposable chopsticks with just her right hand.

“Wait a minute!”

But Koutarou stopped her before she could dig in. Being so rudely interrupted, she looked up at him with a dissatisfied expression.

“Why are you bullying me?”

All of the instant noodles in the apartment were hers and everyone knew it. Moreover, having her mealtime intruded upon was a grave offense.

“You can eat, but promise me one thing first.”

“Sure, I promise! Thank you for the food!”

Not even bothering to hear what it was, she agreed to the promise and chowed down. She wanted the noodles in front of her just that

badly, and she trusted that Koutarou would only be asking her for a promise if it was something important.

“Don’t forget that you promised.”

“Mmhmm.”

“So once you’re done eating, make sure you continue on your homework.”

“...Huh?”

Yurika froze on the spot.

“Th-That’s impossible! I can’t do any more!”

Yurika instantly forgot about her food and frantically shook her head. As she did, the noodles still hanging from her mouth went swinging too, flipping soup everywhere.

“But you promised. And you’ve already started eating.”

“Hrk!”

Yurika was at a loss for words. Thoughtlessly jumping into a promise had backfired. She’d wanted those noodles, but it was sounding now like the price would be getting plunged straight back into hell. Realizing that, Yurika quickly slurped down the rest of her noodles and pleaded with Koutarou.

“I-I can’t go on! I’m not making up excuses; it’s really impossible!”

She wouldn’t be able to finish even if she gave it everything she had. Her mind and body were at their limits. She didn’t have the willpower or stamina left to face her remaining homework. That’s why she was desperately trying to get him to understand. She was sad it had to end this way, but there was nothing she could do about it now.

But then Koutarou reached out with his hands and placed them on Yurika’s cheeks.

“Yurika, look at me.”

Koutarou gently turned Yurika’s face towards his. When he did, she slowly looked up at him.

“Yurika, you really did work hard. You worked until you hit your limits. Well done, Yurika. Well done.”

“Huh...?”

Yurika’s eyes shot wide open. The last thing she’d expected was to be praised right now. But Koutarou ignored her confusion and continued.

“But knowing that, I still have to ask you...”

Pausing there after a short preamble, Koutarou posed his real question.

“Yurika, is it really impossible to go on?”

“Satomi-san...”

The Yurika that Koutarou knew was a wildly careless, sloppy girl. She always tried to slack off and dodge her responsibilities. She was the kind of girl whose future you really had to worry about.

“I know you have it in you to go one step further than you think you can. I know you can do it.”

But on the other hand, he also knew that Yurika would never give up when it really mattered. Like when Sanae started to disappear as a ghost or when she threw herself in the way to save Harumi. There were plenty of examples. And that was the kind of spirit he was expecting her to show right now.

“So, Yurika, why not try a little more? You only have to go as far as you can. And if you really can’t continue, you can stop. How about it?”

“I...”

Koutarou stared directly into Yurika’s eyes. As he did, she felt like he was staring into the depths of her heart. His eyes were telling her that she should be able to do even more.

This is because Satomi-san has high expectations for me, isn’t it...?

Yurika knew of Koutarou’s dark past and his hesitations. But here he was, counting on her to try her best. Looking at the bigger picture, that meant he was pushing for their future together. And the moment she realized that, Yurika made up her mind.

“Okay, I’ll try a little more,” she said with a nod.

He’d taken this step for her, and she couldn’t turn him down. She didn’t mind how irresponsible she was when it came to herself, but she couldn’t let her friends down. In that, Yurika had matured enough that she was genuinely worthy of being called a magical girl.

Shizuka and Maki silently watched over their two friends. They were convinced that not even Koutarou would be able to help Yurika this time, but he betrayed their expectation and successfully got her back to work.

“What a surprise. Satomi-kun really does understand Yurika-chan...”

“That looked more like Yurika was being considerate of Satomi-kun’s feelings to me.”

“I think it’s both. Satomi-kun asked Yurika, and she responded. It’s a two-way street with those two.”

“I’m a little envious, honestly.”

“Yeah, it’s like they’re using Yurika’s homework as a means to get closer.”

Shizuka and Maki both smiled. Koutarou and Yurika’s bond seemed to have deepened. It wasn’t clear if they were serious about Yurika’s homework or if they were just playing around.

“I have an idea, Aika-san.”

“Yes?”

“Let’s try and see if we can get Satomi-kun to do the same for us

next time.”

Having come up with a plan, Shizuka grinned as she tossed a sidelong glance Koutarou’s way. He was helping Yurika right now, but he had no idea what he was in for.

“I don’t think we even have to test it... Ah, but, there might be some superficial differences.”

Maki was convinced that Koutarou would do the same for them. She didn’t think it was necessary to test that, so she felt a bit badly about putting him through the extra trouble.

“But those differences are the part you should savor.”

“You can be surprisingly mean sometimes, Kasagi-san.”

“We want to enjoy our youth too, right?”

“...Yes, I agree.”

The two of them continued to cheerfully chat away as they watched Yurika tackle her homework again with Koutarou’s help. Koutarou and Yurika’s bond wasn’t the only one to deepen that day. The same was true for Maki and Shizuka.

On the evening of August 31st, Yurika solved the final problem of her summer homework 36 hours after she’d begun the arduous task.

“I-It’s done... I’m done...”

The pencil in Yurika’s hand dropped to the table and rolled away.

“Good work, Yurika-chan.”

As if waiting for that moment, Shizuka set down a glass of barley tea in front of Yurika. She’d been checking on her from time to time, she roughly knew the progress that Yurika had been making. The same was true for Maki, who was smiling and looking over Yurika’s handiwork.

“There are a lot of mistakes, but you’ve finished everything. I’m impressed you could be so obstinate, Yurika.”

“Th-Thank you very much, Shizuka-san, Maki-chan...”

Yurika took a celebratory swig of her drink with tears of relief streaming down her cheeks. Barley tea had never tasted so good to her.

The trial’s all over now... I better have Satomi-san praise me later!

Yurika felt a grand sense of accomplishment as she sipped on her tea, but then Shizuka dropped a second bomb.

“Now all that’s left is your report. Good job, Yurika-chan. Oh, or do you already have something planned for that?”

“Huh?! What report?!”

She could barely process that word. She’d thought that all of those worksheets were her summer homework, so a new assignment rearing its head out of the blue was an unexpected disaster.

“Wh-What kind of homework is that?!”

“You forgot, huh? Or maybe you were asleep? Either way, during our last integrated studies class, we were told to write a report about the occupational training we had before summer vacation.”

Since the assignment was given just before summer break, it ended up getting rolled into the other summer homework. It was tradition for Kisshouharukaze High School to have occupational training for its second-year students just before summer vacation. It was a variant of a school excursion where students got to go to different workplaces and learn what it was like to be employed there. They were then asked to submit a report on what the experience was like, but because the training had fallen so close to summer vacation this year, the students would be turning their reports in at the start of the new semester.

And what that ultimately meant was that Yurika wasn't done with her homework. She still had an entire report to go.

“Th-The occupational training...? What did I do again...? Um...”

Yurika desperately tried to recall what she'd been doing a month and a half ago, but she was completely fuzzy. Oblivious to the fact that she'd have to write a report on it later, she'd done whatever work she was asked without a second thought and hadn't committed any of it to memory. No matter how hard she tried to recall the experience, it was now buried beneath everything that had happened over summer vacation. In other words, it was gone. She'd totally forgotten it.

“I can't remember at all! Shizuka-san, Maki-chan, help me!”

Without her own brain to rely on, Yurika turned to her friends. She started with imploring Shizuka and Maki, who were right there in the room with her.

“We'd love too, but...”

“We were in a different group than you. We don't even know what you did.”

“No way!”

But alas, not even Shizuka and Maki could help her.

“Aaahhh, what should I do?!”

Yurika clutched her head in agony. She felt like everything was all over.

“Calm down, Yurika. Start by trying to remember the other people who were in your training group.”

“The other people... That's right! I was with Satomi-san!”

“So you should ask Satomi-kun what you were doing and write your report based on that.”

“I'm going to go find Satomi-san right away! Maki-chan, where is he now?!”

Koutarou was nowhere to be seen in room 106. But Maki, who was an acknowledged vassal of Koutarou's, should have a good idea

where he might be.

“He should be at Clan-san’s place today as well.”

“Okay!”

Having gotten the information needed from Maki, Yurika made a beeline for Koutarou. Right now, he was her only hope.

After jumping through the gate in the inner room, Yurika was promptly transported aboard the Hazy Moon. She was now running down the halls of the ship, her echoing footsteps making a metallic sound on the strange floor. Unlike cramped room 106, the beautiful white halls of the Hazy Moon seemed to stretch on forever.

“Clan-san’s room is... Ah, that should be it!”

Clan’s room was just up ahead from where Yurika had been gated in. It was easy enough to find, even for an unfamiliar visitor, for it was marked with a wooden placard that read “Princess Clariosa’s Room” and was decorated with stars. It wasn’t at all Clan’s style, betraying that Koutarou and Sanae had made it for her. They had hoped its cheerful design would rub off on her, but sadly it still hadn’t had much effect.

“Clan-san, Clan-san! Please give me Satomi-san!”

Yurika burst into Clan’s room at full speed. Had the door not been automatic, she might have broken right through it.

“That’s unusual. You hardly ever come here, Yu— Kyaaaaah!”

“Clan-san, please give me Satomi-san! Please!”

Clan had known Yurika was on the way the moment she passed through the gate, but the energy and momentum of her entrance took Clan by surprise. She yelped and jumped back some.

“Wh-What’s the matter?!”

“It would take too long to explain, but I can’t finish my homework without Satomi-san! So please give him to me!”

Yurika apprised Clan of the situation as briefly as possible and held out her hands as if she actually expected Clan to physically give her Koutarou.

“I see, so that’s what this is about. I don’t mind. It’s not like I have any business with Veltlion.”

Clan readily agreed. Koutarou had only come to the Hazy Moon to ask her for help, so it wasn’t like she needed him for anything. That’s why she had no objections if he was taken away.

“Thank you very much! Now where is he?!”

“He’s right over there.”

“Satomi-san!”

Yurika ran in the direction Clan pointed her. There was a sofa and a desk across the room, and Yurika could see Koutarou’s neck and shoulders over the back of the sofa. He’d been coming over to Clan’s

place to work on his own homework the past couple of days.

“Satomi-san, please help! Please tell me what we did during the occupational training!”

Yurika ran around to the other side of the sofa and immediately began begging.

“Satomi-san! Ah...”

But when she saw Koutarou’s face, she lost all her momentum. She fell silent and despair filled her heart. For when she saw Koutarou, she realized all hope was lost.

“It’s over... my homework... This is just too cruel...”

Koutarou was leaned back on the sofa dead asleep. He hadn’t so much as flinched when Yurika called out to him. And she knew from experience that when he was out cold like this, there was no waking him up. In other words, he couldn’t help her.

“Haaahh... And I tried so hard, too... only to trip at the finish line... This is just...”

Yurika was crushed. She’d had her last lifeline cut just as she was about to make it to safety. She’d worked so hard over the last two days, and learning that it had all been for naught made it feel terrible.

“Oh, so he’s asleep, is he? I thought he was being awfully quiet. But I guess that’s to be expected. He’s been working on that report since yesterday, after all... What’s the matter, Yurika-san?”

“It’s nothing... I was just thinking that Satomi-san looks so peaceful when he sleeps...”

Tiny waterfalls streamed from Yurika’s eyes. Crying was all she could do now.

“I don’t really get it, but... Here, Yurika-san. This is for you.”

“What’s this?”

Clan handed her something. She couldn’t clearly see what it was through her tears, but it felt like some papers.

“Veltlion told me to give that to you... It seems like he knew this would happen.”

“Satomi-san did...?”

Yurika wiped away her tears and looked down at what she was holding. The top page of the stack of papers read, “Occupational training report: insect caretakers at a pet shop. A collaboration between Satomi Koutarou and Nijino Yurika.”

It was the report Koutarou had been working so hard on. He normally would have done his own, but after seeing how hard Yurika was working to get the rest of her homework done, he’d decided to make it a collaborative project. That meant more work for him since he’d have to make up for Yurika’s contribution to the report, which was why it had taken him so long to get it done. That was really why he hadn’t been in room 106 the past couple of days.

“Satomi-san... you really are...”

The tears Yurika wiped away began overflowing once more. A deep sense of relief and gratitude filled her chest. Believing that she'd finish the rest of her homework on her own, he'd done his part to help her by writing a report for them both. Really and truly, he'd had faith in her. The joy she'd felt from completing her homework didn't hold a candle to the elation she felt when she read that title.

“There's so much I want to say, but... I'm almost at my limit too... so I'll just say this one thing...”

Yurika began muttering as she collapsed onto the sofa too. She'd plopped down right next to Koutarou and ended up leaning on him. As she did, she whispered into his ear...

“Satomi-san, just like I promised, I finished my homework...”

And with that, Yurika quietly shut her eyes. She was already well past her limits. Being even more exhausted than Koutarou, she fell asleep mere seconds after closing her eyes.

“I don't like being treated like some side character after spending two days helping, free of charge, but...” Clan pulled a blanket over the two of them and left the room after turning off most lights. “Heh, out of respect for your hard work, I'll let you have Veltlion for today, Yurika-san.”

When Clan shut the door behind her, silence fell over the room once more. There was no sound other than the quiet, rhythmical breathing of the snoozing Yurika and Koutarou. Clan had no intention of disturbing them, so they would stay like that for some time. Yurika was oblivious to it since she was dead asleep, but it would make her very, very happy.

Welcome, Father!

Saturday, September 4th

It was the Saturday following the end of summer vacation, and Koutarou's father, Satomi Yuichirou, was in town on business. Normally he would be in a hurry to finish up his work and get back, but circumstances had conspired, leaving him with a free evening in Kisshouharukaze City. So Yuichirou decided to pay his son a visit. Since it was unannounced and so sudden, he thought he might get to surprise Koutarou, and Yuichirou wanted to make full use of that.

"Let's see, it should be just up ahead..."

Yuichirou made his way to Corona House following a map in his head. He'd only been there once last year, but fortunately his memory served him well and he made it there without getting lost.

"Here it is, Corona House. This is definitely the place."

Corona House was supposedly built over twenty-five years ago, but it was impossible to tell from the outside. It looked a bit old fashioned, but the building itself was very well maintained. It was clear that the caretaker or landlord put a lot of love into the place.

"I hope Koutarou is doing all right..."

When he'd visited him last year, Koutarou's room was clean and the contents of his fridge were neatly arranged. He distinctly remembered it as a surprise since he'd never been that neat while the two of them were living together.

But that was all over a year ago. It was possible he'd just taken extra good care of the place when he first moved in. And if that were the case, then he should be able to see how Koutarou was really living by getting a look at his apartment now. That's why Yuichirou hadn't let Koutarou know he was coming.

"Now, Koutarou's apartment number was 106..."

Yuichirou entered the Corona House property and found his way to room 106. He was looking forward to seeing his son and how he was doing, but he still felt uneasy. Having raised Koutarou on his own, he felt like he'd put him through a lot as a child. He was concerned as a father, worried if, in his absence, Koutarou had returned to the rough way he lived when he was younger. That was what he wanted to find out, and namely why he was dropping by unannounced. He wanted an honest glimpse of Koutarou's life.

"This is the one."

Yuichirou now stood in front of the front door to room 106. Without any hesitation, he pressed the intercom button and a chime rang out.

“Yes?”

And that was when the unexpected happened. It was a woman’s voice that answered over the intercom, and a rather young one at that. Whoever it was, she sounded like she was in her teens or early twenties.

A woman? Did Koutarou get a girlfriend?

The first question that came to Yuichirou’s mind was what kind of relationship Koutarou had with this woman. He himself had had a girlfriend at that age, so he wouldn’t think it strange if Koutarou did too. If anything, since Koutarou had always been a bit of a loner, it would be a welcome development.

“Who is it?”

However, the moment Yuichirou saw the face of the girl who opened the door, he abandoned the girlfriend theory. She had long golden hair and beautiful blue eyes. She was obviously a foreigner, and she was rather short and youthful. She looked several years younger than Koutarou. Yuichirou couldn’t imagine Koutarou dating a younger girl, much less one from a foreign country.

“What is it?”

“It’s a guest. He’s wearing a suit in this hot weather, so he must be a door to door salesman or something.”

“Your Highness, that manner of speaking is rude to our guest.”

The next two girls that appeared in the doorway further confirmed Yuichirou’s suspicions. They were also foreigners, one wearing glasses and one with short hair and a very serious look about her. Seeing the three of them standing together, Yuichirou was quite sure he’d rung the wrong doorbell.

“I’m sorry, it seems I have the wrong apartment.”

“I see. Well, that kind of thing can happen when it’s so hot out.”

“Sorry for bothering you.”

“Don’t worry about it. Good day.”

The golden-haired girl bid him farewell with an elegant smile that had a strange charm to it. It left Yuichirou standing in place for a moment even after she shut the door.

“Oh right, Koutarou.”

Coming back to his senses, Yuichirou checked the address again. He’d already gotten the wrong apartment once, and he didn’t want to repeat the same mistake.

“Oh?”

But when he looked again, the placard by the front door to the apartment he was standing in front of read, “Room 106: Satomi.” Just

to be certain, Yuichirou pulled out his wallet and confirmed the address. And sure enough, the slip of paper he had read, "Corona House, room 106." He was in the right place after all. This was indeed Koutarou's apartment.

"So those girls must've been Koutarou's friends or something..."

Perhaps Yuichirou had been too hasty in assuming Koutarou didn't have any foreign friends. Maybe his school had an overseas exchange program or something.

"All right..."

Recollecting himself, Yuichirou reached out for the intercom again. He was a bit hesitant since this would be his second time ringing it, but the chime sounded just the same.

"Yes?"

A girl's voice answered the same as it had before, and the knob turned as she opened the door. Yuichirou was sure it would be the same girl again.

"Who are you, mister?"

"Huh?"

However, Yuichirou was in for another surprise. The person who answered the door this time was a young Japanese girl with a rice cracker in her mouth. Her big eyes looked Yuichirou up and down in puzzlement.

"A guest again?"

"If he's this persistent, he must be under a lot of pressure to sell."

Past her were two more girls Yuichirou had never seen before. One was a bright, active looking girl sporting a ponytail and an apron, and the other girl in twintails and seemed to be lacking in confidence. It seemed these girls had replaced the group of three who'd answered the door the first time.

"So, why are you here, mister?"

The girl standing in front of him took the rice cracker out of her mouth as she spoke. Her question made him recall his real purpose here.

"Ah, um... Actually, I'm here to see the tenant of this apartment."

"Oh, Koutarou?"

Upon hearing the girl say his son's name, Yuichirou knew for certain he had to be in the right place. But nevertheless, he still had his doubts. Judging from the girls' appearances, they were all Koutarou's age. But what on earth was he doing with six girls in his apartment?

"Yes, actually—"

Just as Yuichirou was about to try and get to the bottom of things, the cellphone in his pocket started going off.

"Who is it calling now... Oh!"

Yuichirou interrupted his conversation with the girl to take a look at his phone. The name displayed on the screen was one of his business partners he'd be meeting with later.

"Miss, I'm very sorry. This is an important call, so I'll have to take my leave for now. I'll be back later."

"Ah, yeah, okay."

Yuichirou took the call as he walked away from the apartment. He'd come to Corona House to see his son, but it wasn't like he was on vacation. He still had work to do.

The call was indeed an urgent one. His business partner wanted to delay the meeting from 7PM to 8PM and needed to confirm everyone's schedules right away. Once that was taken care of, Yuichirou ended the call. Since that was the only reason his partner had contacted him, their conversation lasted not even five minutes.

"Ugh, those girls must think I'm just some strange old man..."

Yuichirou smiled wryly as he returned the cellphone to his pocket and pressed the intercom button for a third time.

"Yes?"

The voice this time was high-pitched and carried far. It wasn't either of the two girls he'd talked with before. But knowing that there were four other girls in the room, Yuichirou just assumed it was one of them and didn't think too much about it.

"Who might you be?"

However, once more, Yuichirou was in for another surprise. The girl who opened the door this time was yet another girl he'd never met. She had long, black hair and a thin figure. She was very demure and seemed to radiate gentleness and refinement. It seemed obvious she'd had a good upbringing.

What is going on here...? Koutarou, just what kind of life are you living?

As Yuichirou was stunned by the appearance of a seventh girl, yet another one appeared behind her.

"Harumi, what is it?"

The eighth girl to appear also had long, black hair and was wearing something akin to traditional Japanese clothing. She appeared calm and mature, and was holding a frying pan in one hand. It seemed she was in the middle of cooking. She too seemed to have had a good upbringing, though in a slightly different way.

"Kiriha-san... it seems the man from before is back again."

"I see. Let me handle this."

The girl in Japanese clothing put down the frying pan and traded places with the first girl. She looked up at Yuichirou with calm and confident eyes. She looked about the same age as the other girls he'd

seen, but she was unmistakably more mature.

“What business do you have with us, sir?”

The girl’s brisk words struck Yuichirou, but that helped bring him out of his state of awe.



“I believe Satomi Koutarou lives here and I would like to speak with him.”

“With Koutarou? I see... If I’m not mistaken, you must be Koutarou’s...”

The girl seemed to have realized something after speaking with Yuichirou and nodded. She turned her head back and called out toward the inner room of the apartment.

“Maki.”

“What is it?”

Yet another girl poked her head out from around the corner, making a total of nine. This new girl had soft-looking hair that reached her shoulders and eyes that spoke to an adamant will. But there was also something delicate about her, giving her a very mysterious aura.

“Where is Koutarou right now?”

“Satomi-kun left for work this morning, so he should be coming home soon.”

“I see. Thank you, Maki.”

“You’re welcome.”

After answering the question, the ninth girl returned to the inner room. The girl at the door then turned back to Yuichirou and passed along the answer.

“Koutarou is currently at his part-time job. He works at the excavation site on the top of the hill by Kisshouharukaze High School.”

“Yes, I’ve heard about it from Koutarou.”

Koutarou had told his dad about his job before. Since he was still a student, he’d needed parental consent to take the job in the first place.

“And we are...”

Eventually, the girl began telling Yuichirou what he wanted to know most. Right now, he was more interested in what these girls were doing here than where Koutarou was.

“We’re all friends Koutarou has made over the last year. We’re all close enough that we frequently come and go between each other’s houses.”

After explaining who she was, the girl politely bowed. The other girl standing behind her—the one who’d opened the door this time—also bowed. They were both extremely well-mannered.

“How wonderful. I am Satomi Yuichirou, Koutarou’s father.”

Yuichirou responded by bowing as well. Politeness beget politeness. That earnest seriousness was something the girls had seen before in Koutarou, and it made them feel like they knew Yuichirou a

little better already.

“I’ve heard about you, and it’s nice to meet you. I’m Kurano Kiriha.”

“And I’m Sakuraba Harumi, a friend of Satomi-kun’s from school.”

And so Yuichirou was introduced to all nine girls. It was a far more peaceful meeting than Koutarou had had with them, yet the girls were all more nervous than they’d ever been with Koutarou. If Yuichirou disliked them, it would certainly be a strike against them in the future.

Koutarou didn’t know that his father had come visit until after he returned home from work that day. Excavation work got him dirty and sweaty, so in order to keep it safe, he always left it in his locker when he went out into the field.

“Not good! If everyone runs into my old man...!”

After changing back into his normal clothes and getting his phone out of his locker, Koutarou sent a frantic group message to the girls telling them to steer clear of the apartment until later that night. He then hurried home. Even if the girls weren’t there, their stuff was all over the apartment. He’d have to clean up before his dad got there.

“Hey, Koutarou!”

“Old man?!”

Unfortunately, by the time Koutarou returned to Corona House, Yuichirou was already there. His only saving grace was that Yuichirou was sitting outside his apartment having a cigarette.

“You got back quicker than I thought.”

Yuichirou smiled when he saw he son’s face before stuffing his cigarette into a portable ashtray. He’d taken up smoking after losing his wife, but in order to set a good example, he never did it in front of his son.

“All right. Let’s go, Koutarou.”

“Go? Where?”

“Since it’s the first time we’ve been together in so long, I thought we should go visit your mother.”

Yuichirou picked up the bouquet sitting beside him. He’d brought it especially for the occasion.

“All right, let’s do it.”

Koutarou quickly agreed. Nothing bad could come from getting away from his room, and it had been some time since the two of them visited his mother’s grave together.

Koutarou’s mother, Takami, had left this world about eleven years ago. She was a fine woman, mother, and wife, and even Koutarou’s father’s side of the family had deeply mourned her loss. Her ashes

were interred at the Satomi family grave. She'd only been married to Yuichirou for a handful of years, but no one in the Satomi family objected to her joining them.

"It's been a while, darling... Both Koutarou and I are doing just fine."

"I'm fine, but the old man is iffy. I'm still not sure he can do housework for himself."

"Don't treat me like an idiot. I can do it when I have to."

"Well, I'm sure mom knows better than I do."

Yuichirou set down the bouquet of flowers as he and his son talked in front of Takami's grave. If Koutarou used the spiritual powers he'd gotten from Sanae, he could easily confirm whether or not his mother's spirit was actually there. But he chose not to. To humans, the truth wasn't always necessarily important. There was meaning in speaking to her grave like she was there, whether she really was or not. At least, that's what Koutarou believed.

"Jeez, you take after your mother."

"What parts?"

"The inflexible part."

"And you couldn't leave that alone."

"Well, no, I couldn't... Stop making me say embarrassing stuff."

"Sorry, sorry. But there you have it, mom. You don't have to worry about us."

"We're doing fine, Takami, so please keep watching over us from heaven."

Koutarou and Yuichirou continued to talk to their departed mother and wife for some time. It was almost as if they were trying to recreate the casual family atmosphere they'd had between them eleven years ago. In the midst of this, Koutarou wore a lonely expression he very rarely showed anyone. Since his mother's death had greatly influenced his personality, he just wasn't his usual self here.

After visiting Takami's grave, Koutarou and Yuichirou headed towards the station. Yuichirou had a business meeting he needed to get to, so he only had a little more time with his son. By the time the sun set, he'd transform from a loving husband and father back into a working businessman.

"I caused an awful lot of trouble for you after your mother died..."

"I'm old enough now to know that you were grieving in your own way, so I'm not mad anymore."

"I see... I guess that's not all that strange if you're at the age you've started dating now."

"I don't have a whole lot to say for myself on that front."

Koutarou and Yuichirou continued talking on their way to the station. The topic shifted from Koutarou's mother to Koutarou himself. But it was only natural that a father living so far apart from his son would be interested in his life. The light of the fading sun washed over them as they walked down the street next to each other.

"But you still have some girls you get along with, right?"

"Well, a few."

"Nine is plenty. Isn't there someone among them you're interested in?"

"Huh?!"

Koutarou was at a loss for words. What Yuichirou had just said so casually caught him off guard. If he knew there were nine girls in Koutarou's life, that could only mean one thing.

"Did you meet them, old man?"

Koutarou chose his words carefully as he asked his father that. Each of the girls was strange in their own way, so he was immediately worried Yuichirou had gotten the wrong impression of them. There was also the question of what his father would have to say about finding nine girls in his apartment. It was an extremely tense situation for Koutarou.

"Hmm? Yes, I did. Not long before you got back home. They're all nice girls."

But Yuichirou's smile alleviated all of Koutarou's worries. It was clear he thought well of the girls and hadn't gotten the wrong impression at all.

"There were so many of them that I didn't get all the details, but... it seems like you helped them all out in their time of need."

"Ah, yeah. Something like that."

Koutarou now had a rough understanding of what had happened when Yuichirou met the girls. They had omitted any of the unbelievable or difficult details and had only told him the essentials. That would be the easiest way for Yuichirou—a normal man who lived a normal life—to understand what had happened between them.

"And we've gotten closer since then."

"To be honest, Koutarou, apart from Kenji-kun, I didn't expect you to find more friends like that. I was a bit surprised," Yuichirou said with a wry smile.

"Old man..."

Despite the girls omitting certain details, Yuichirou had gotten the gist of their relationship with Koutarou.

"I've finally come to understand how you're doing so well on your own, Koutarou. It's thanks to those girls."

Their existence was a very welcome thing to Yuichirou. He was always worried about how much love Koutarou was getting, so their

presence in his life was a blessing. And it was an added blessing that they were all such wonderful people. It was a relief to him as a father since Koutarou had only ever had Kenji to depend on before this.

"I've only just realized that myself."

"That's good. Don't forget to be thankful for those girls."

"I am and I intend to be."

"Then we're good."

Yuichirou smiled happily and nodded. Seeing that, Koutarou realized that the meeting between his dad and the girls went far better than he'd ever imagined. Of course, Koutarou intended to treasure the girls. He had no intention of betraying them or Yuichirou.

"By the way, Koutarou, who is it that you fancy?"

"Huh? What now, all of a sudden?"

Koutarou's eyes shot wide open in surprise. Yuichirou had asked something completely unexpected.

"They're an amazing group of ladies. I'm sure at least one of them has caught your eye."

"Well, yeah, but... I'm still not sure."

Koutarou didn't have an answer. Right now, he wasn't sure how to make that choice.

"Is that so?"

"Dad, what made you decide to marry mom?"

But if Koutarou could learn why Yuichirou had chosen Takami, he might find a way to choose for himself. He wanted his father's advice.

"Why I chose her, huh...? We actually got along poorly at first."

"It never seemed that way to me."

Koutarou always remembered his parents being close. He found it very hard to believe that there was ever a time they hadn't gotten along.

"Well, of course not. We only got married because we worked things out."

"Yeah, okay... Then how did you work things out?"

"I'll spare you the embarrassing details, but mainly... Mainly we gradually grew to understand each other as time passed."

"I see..."

"The real catalyst was that we got involved with the same problem and it just sort of happened as we were working on resolving it. But that was just the opportunity and not the reason."

"I think I can understand."

Yuichirou's story hit pretty close to home for Koutarou. His relationship with the girls had followed a similar path. They'd gotten to know each other through their troubles, and that ultimately brought them closer together.

"That's why it felt right for me and Takami. Do you feel that way

about someone, Koutarou?”

Yuichirou smiled when he asked Koutarou that. He was interested both as Koutarou’s father and as his friend. He was proud to see his son growing up, and the rare smile he was showing reflected that.

“It’s still hard. I don’t really get it. They’re all wonderful girls in their own ways.”

In Koutarou’s mind, there wasn’t a single girl that stood above the rest. But that wasn’t because none of them felt right to him. If anything, it was the opposite.

Just who do I love...? What should I do from now on...?

He felt like he understood all of the girls and they all understood him in return. He also knew their worries and weaknesses. He didn’t want to leave them be, and he didn’t want to be left alone either. As they overcame hardships together, the feeling that he’d met the right one blossomed in his heart. The problem was that he felt that way about more than one girl. And by the time he realized what was going on, he felt that way about all nine of them.

“Think it over carefully. Nothing good will come from rushing a decision like this. It’ll affect the rest of both of your lives, after all.”

“Old man...”

“And because they’re all nice girls, I’ll never let you live it down if you make a half-assed decision.”

“Haha, that sounds just like you, old man.”

Koutarou was smiling now too. He knew his dad was right. He couldn’t make this decision haphazardly. If everyone felt right to him, it meant that they were all precious. He couldn’t risk doing something half-assed that would hurt any one of them. And if he didn’t know what the right choice was now, it just meant he needed to spend more time with all of them to figure it out.

“By the way, how are things looking on your end?”

Having reached his conclusion on the matter, Koutarou shifted the topic back to Yuichirou. This seemed like an opportune time, and there was something in particular he wanted to know.

“You’ve found a nice person, right?”

“Koutarou...”

Based on the way his dad was talking and acting, Koutarou could sense there was a woman in his life. He hadn’t said anything about it, however, so he knew he’d have to ask to get it out of him.

“I’m fine now. I’m all grown up, and I have Mackenzie and everyone else. You can be free, old man.”

Koutarou knew why Yuichirou had stayed a widower all this time. He still loved his late wife, and he also held back out of consideration for Koutarou. But now he felt like Yuichirou was being held back by all that, which wasn’t good.

“I’ve decided to continue living as I am until you’ve become an independent adult. There’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“So there really *is* someone.”

“Yeah...”

“Man, I feel bad for her. You’re keeping her waiting, right?”

Koutarou’s first sign that there was a woman in Yuichirou’s life was the way he was dressed. Koutarou had always been in charge of housework while they were living together, but one day, Yuichirou had started washing his own clothes. That was back while Koutarou was in middle school, and it had already been several years since.

“She understands. I’ve told her everything,” Yuichirou explained as he glanced back over his shoulder.

“I see...”

Seeing that gesture, Koutarou understood that the real reason his relationship hadn’t developed with this woman was indeed because he still loved his late wife.

I guess it’s not really something that should be rushed...

Koutarou thought of the half-knit sweater hidden away in his wardrobe. His mother had been in the middle of working on it that fateful day. Completing it would be one step closer to closure for both Koutarou and Yuichirou. One step closer to moving on. It was the very reason Koutarou had joined the knitting society.

“In exchange...”

“Hmm?”

“You better make the wedding a big one. You’ve kept her waiting for years, right?”

“Koutarou... Yeah, by all means, let’s do that.”

Father and son continued walking towards the station, talking about this and that before parting ways. While their goodbyes were brief, there was no doubt that today had been very meaningful for both of them.

When Koutarou returned to the apartment, all of the girls were sitting bolt upright for some reason.

“I’m back... What are you guys doing?”

Koutarou had no idea what had gotten into them. But in response to his question, they all lowered their heads. It almost looked like they were going to grovel.

“H-Hey?”

“We’re sorry!” all nine girls declared.

“Like I said, what on earth are you guys doing?”

The girls were apologizing, but he had absolutely no clue as to why. The gesture only confused him even further.

“There is something that we need to apologize to you for.”

Seeing the confounded look on Koutarou’s face, Kiriha began

explaining. Behind her, the other eight girls nodded their heads in unison. It seemed Kiriha was speaking on behalf of everyone.

“We all met your father. He actually arrived here before he contacted you. We know we may have caused trouble for you, which is why we’re apologizing to you like this.”

“We’re sorry!” they all proclaimed again, lowering their heads.

That was when things finally clicked for Koutarou. They were apologizing because they were worried about having met his dad.

“We’ll be careful not to be seen by others in the future.”

“What, is that all...? I thought something bad had happened...”

Koutarou let out a small sigh and sat down facing the girls. He’d been worried because they all seemed so serious.

“Satomi-kun, you’re not... mad?”

It was Maki, who was sitting closest to Koutarou, that spoke up. She was terrified of the idea of Koutarou being upset with her, so she was keenly interested in how he was feeling. And in response to her question, he casually shook his head.

“No, I’m not angry. I was the one who couldn’t get in touch with you guys. Besides, the old man was in a great mood. He kept talking about what nice girls you all were and everything. So there’s nothing for me to be mad about, really.”

Koutarou considered it his fault for not being in touch, but more importantly, everything had gone well. His father genuinely seemed to like the girls, and they’d done nothing wrong. As far as he was concerned, they had nothing to apologize for.

“I see... Thank god...”

Maki let out a sigh of relief. The other eight girls did the same in varying degrees, and it wasn’t until then that they were all able to relax some. However, the atmosphere was still somewhat strange. Koutarou continued the conversation to try and fix that.

“By the way, what did you all talk with my old man about?”

“Well, we started at the beginning and went from there. We just left out the parts we couldn’t share.”

Sanae responded in kind to Koutarou. She didn’t like the stiff air in the room either.

“We told him how we first met and that we didn’t get along back then.”

“And about the sports festival and our beach trip. We also talked about the cultural festival.”

“I was the one to tell him about the play.”

“Yuichirou-sama wanted to see pictures of you in costume, so I presented him with some from the play.”

The girls joined in one after another, reporting what they had shared with Yuichirou. Listening to them all now, Koutarou began

thinking.

Yeah, a lot has happened between us...

Even discounting all the bad parts and all the fighting, Koutarou and the girls had still been through a lot together. They'd had plenty of stories to tell Yuichirou—more than enough for just one sitting. It was probably all a surprise to hear. And as Koutarou listened to the girls recount it all now, he smiled inside.

"I told him about the time I was stranded on the snowy mountainside and how you saved me."

"My jaw nearly hit the floor when you started telling him about that, Aika-san. That story was just barely safe to tell. Ah, I told him that I was your landlord."

"I told him about how you like to go insect hunting from time to time, Veltlion. It sounds like that's always been a hobby of yours."

"I told him about how we rode the rollercoaster together and such."

"And I told him about our activities in the knitting society."

As he continued to listen to the girls, another thought crossed Koutarou's mind.

Someone who feels right, huh...?

It was that all of these girls, each and every one, was special to him. To borrow his father's turn of phrase, they felt right.

"What's the matter, Koutarou?"

"It's nothing. I was just thinking that a lot sure has happened over the last year and a half."

"Yeah... but there'll be even more from here on out."

"Yeah, you're right, Sanae."

"Eeheehee!"

Koutarou and the girls had indeed made a lot of memories together, but this was just the beginning. They'd continue making more together in the days to come. That was as certain as the stars twinkling in the night sky. Koutarou believed it from the bottom of his heart.

To Dark Crimson, her previous loss was extremely humiliating. Despite her combo attacks with Dark Green and her future forecast, they'd been overcome by the wits of just one person who couldn't use magic. As a result, Dark Navy had been captured and was still in enemy hands even now. Darkness Rainbow had no sense of camaraderie. Even as allies, they were only tools for one another to use. But Dark Crimson personally liked Dark Navy—Maki. She could empathize with her natural-born seriousness. So in addition to redeeming her humiliation, she wanted to reclaim Maki. But even if she challenged her captors again, the outcome would just be the same.

Some adjustments were necessary.

The reason she and Dark Green had lost was obvious. Despite being magicians that identified as evangelists of knowledge, they hadn't lost to magic—they'd lost to knowledge. That was why Dark Crimson now sought scientific knowledge for her own gain. And normal science wasn't enough. At best, she would just become equal to her foes. So in order to get what she needed, she'd made a deal with Maya to obtain alien science.

“Ray of Sunshine. Modifier: Single Wavelength.”

Crimson's incantation echoed throughout the training area. When it was complete, a red light extended from her staff. When that light reached the concrete wall in front of her, it cut through it like a warm knife through butter. The red light she'd generated with her mana was a laser beam made up of a single wavelength.

“Ha, hahaha! I see... so that's it! Hahaha! That Kiriha woman was right! We were just sheltered girls unaware of the world around us!”

With the new knowledge she'd acquired, she'd gained new magic power. She now had spells that were founded in the physical rather than the mystical—in science itself. It was the next generation of magic, perhaps most aptly called scientific magic.

“But with this, I can win! As long as I have this power, I can win! Kurano Kiriha, Satomi Koutarou, and Rainbow Yurika, brace yourselves!”

Scientific magic wasn't just limited to lasers, either. Theoretically it had all kinds of applications. Explosions, barriers, information collection... There were countless spells that could be improved with science. It had been several months since her defeat, but Dark Crimson couldn't suppress her elation knowing the day for her revenge was drawing near.



Article 20

Those who have ratified the Corona Convention are to treat Satomi Yuichirou (Corona Convention signatory Satomi Koutarou's legal guardian) like they would their own fathers.

Article 20 Postscript

I'm sure this will be for the best—in more ways than one!



Corona Convention

New! September 6th, 2010

Afterword

Long time no see everyone, it's the author Takehaya. I guess since I wrote a novel as a bonus for the recently released Blu-ray, it may have only been a few days for some of you.

Concerning anime, if everything proceeds smoothly, this volume should be released right around the time the final episode is about to air. As those of you who have been watching might know, the anime is focused on the foundation of the series. Skimping on that would have only undercut important scenes in the future, like Koutarou rejecting Alaia's invitation.

The time leap was actually one of the things I was the most wary of. For example, if the anime had started at 7.5, Koutarou would've had no reason to return to his own world because he only would've had demonstrable bonds with the characters in the past. Even if he'd returned because of a forcibly contrived reason, the viewers would probably have felt like something was off. Moreover, with no reason to return, the last scene in 8.5 wouldn't make much sense. It all would have been much vaguer.

So in the end, I decided to take the long way and start at the beginning. That meant focusing on volumes 1 through 7. The most important part of that was setting up a story where Koutarou would choose to return to his own life, and I'm very satisfied that the anime was able to portray that. All that's left now is to pray for a second season (ha!).

But I shouldn't just talk about the anime, should I? I feel like I should touch on the content of volume 17 as well.

This volume was a bunch of mini episodes about the invaders that had Koutarou as their main focus. Koutarou's father also makes a cameo for the first time in a long time (it's been since volume 1!). This gives us an opportunity to see what's going on with the Satomi family. Stuff like this can't happen when there are major events going down, so it only rolls around when things are nice and peaceful like they are in this volume. But maybe I should do it again? Maybe?

Anyway, I think our peek into the Satomi family also gives us a peek into the future. Please continue watching over Koutarou and the invader girls as they overcome their trials.

Normally the afterword would end around here, but this time it's twice as long as normal! I've got some more room, so I'd like to write

a bit about myself since this is the part I usually have to omit for convenience's sake.

Around the end of August, I visited Sasuke Park, the athletic park where you get to put on some safety gear and play your heart out just like on the show. After giving all of the stages a shot, I've come to the conclusion that I can't laugh at people who fall off the stepping stones or fail the long jump anymore. (Translation Note: Sasuke is the name of the Japanese TV show which was the original version of American Ninja Warrior.)

After experiencing it for myself, I realized that all the areas require you to be able to jump a long distance. Even the stepping stones, which look like they're not that far apart, are really something. So I now know why people on the show fall in places I couldn't understand before. Surprisingly, the arm strength obstacles were surprisingly easy.

The impressions I got from watching the show and the impressions I got from trying it myself were completely opposite, and I realized that's what it's like to have your preconceptions challenged. Whenever I watch the show from now on, I think I'll be able to enjoy it in a different way.

I've also started on a new hobby! I'm currently working towards getting my motorcycle license. I think I'll be able to get it before it gets cold out. I've already bought a helmet, so I can't back down now. I don't intend to be very adventurous in choosing a bike. I'll leave the special stuff for later and just focus on the basics for now.

Well then, I feel like I've filled up the space pretty well, and since this seems like a good spot, I'll end this here. As always, I'd like to finish things off with my usual round of thanks. I would like to thank the editorial department for helping me with my work and the making of the anime; the animation studio and all the voice actors; Poco-san who always draws me such cute illustrations; and finally, all of my readers who bought this book.

Let us meet again in the afterword of volume 18.

September, 2014
Takehaya

Bonus Short Stories

Side: Theiamillis

To Theia, Koutarou was every bit as important a vassal as Ruth, but he was also much more than that. He was the man she had feelings for. As such, she wanted him to dote on her and look her way softly from time to time. But because of her stubborn personality, she couldn't honestly admit that... which was the cause of her latest worries. Troubled, she turned to her childhood friend.

"Ruth, you were walking arm in arm with Koutarou the other day, weren't you?"

"You saw, Your Highness?"

"Yes. I happened to spot you on my way back from buying an old game."

"I'm sorry. I thought I was taking care not to attract any attention..."

Ruth bashfully shrunk back upon hearing Theia's remark. She loved having her special moments with Koutarou, but was careful never to do anything that might be awkward for him or upset anyone else.

"That's not the problem. What I want to know is how you manage to do it..."

Theia wanted to know how Ruth got Koutarou to walk arm in arm with her. It seemed so easy for her, but so impossible for Theia. That's why she wanted Ruth's secret.

"If you wish to do the same, Your Highness, all you have to do is ask Master yourself..."

"I'm asking you for advice precisely because I *can't* do that. So please, Ruth, please tell me what to do."

"Your Highness..."

Ruth cocked her head in puzzlement at Theia's request. After pondering it for a moment, she realized there was at least one piece of advice she could give her princess.

"Your relationship with Master is normally more intense than mine, Your Highness."

"Hmm... I can't argue there."

"So I think it would naturally be harder to set the mood for walking arm in arm together."

"That's a good point. As reliable as you are, he always takes you

seriously... but it would only sound like I joke coming from me.”

“With that in mind, I think you should set your sights on discussing serious topics with him.”

“Serious topics, you say?”

“Yes, after discussing something serious, I believe Master would understand it’s no joke.”

“That very well may be true. Thinking back on it, it feels like it’s always been moments like those when the two of us have really bonded.”

“I think that you should try linking arms with Master without saying a word the next time he’s troubled or you thank him for something.”

“Okay, I’ll wait for my chance, then. Thank you, Ruth.”

Theia’s typical bright smile finally came back to her face. Seeing it, Ruth began smiling as well. She was quite satisfied to have offered an answer that helped her princess. But thinking about it, she realized she had a question for Theia too.

“Your Highness, may I ask you something as well?”

“What?”

“How might I get into a fistfight with Master?”

“...Are you serious?”

“Yes, of course.”

Ruth was worried that her relationship with Koutarou was too calm. She wanted to get physical with him, fight or try out wrestling moves with him like he did with Theia from time to time. She believed that Koutarou’s intensity with Theia was one of the ways he expressed his affection, and she wanted to experience it for herself.

“Your Highness, please teach me your ways.”

“You sure are an odd one... But the answer is simple. All you have to do is punch Koutarou for something.”

“I’m asking you for advice precisely because I *can’t* do that.”

“Fine. I suppose... How about we start with complaining about him?”

“Complaining about Master? But he has so few flaws...”

“Just give up here, Ruth. This is fundamentally impossible for you.”

“Please, Your Highness!”

If Ruth used the same stubbornness she was against Theia right now with Koutarou instead, he would eventually fight back. But innocent Ruth would never be able to do that. As such, Theia’s lesson really and truly was lost on her.

Side: Kiriha

A few days had passed since Kiriha had declared that she would invade Koutarou's life, but as far as Koutarou could tell, nothing had really changed—at least, not on the surface. The worst she'd done was surprise him with expressions of love while no one was looking. Yet somehow everything she did tugged at his heart. That was how Koutarou knew that, despite the fact nothing had changed, something was very, very different.

“Take my special attack, Kabutonga Kick!”

It was obvious even today—Kiriha was casually preparing dinner like always and singing to herself in a soft voice, but that was all it took to rattle Koutarou. Having just entered the apartment, he stood rooted in place and stared at her from the front door. Kiriha, standing just ahead in the hallway kitchen, was the first to notice he'd returned home.

“...Oh? Welcome back, Koutarou.”

“Ah, yeah, thanks.”

“What are you standing around over there for?”

“No reason. I was just thinking about something.”

“I see. Would you like to have a seat in the inner room, then? I'll get some barley tea for you. It must have been hot outside.”

“Yeah, uh... Sounds good.”

“Coming right up.”

Feeling strangely bashful, Koutarou accepted Kiriha's proposal and escaped to the inner room.

This is so weird... It's really throwing me off...

Koutarou sat down at his usual place by the tea table and tried to collect himself. He no longer tried to hide the fact that Kiriha was precious to him, but as precious as she was to him now, he needed to keep a different kind of boundary. He didn't want to do anything irresponsible.

“...What's the matter? What are you thinking about?”

Before he knew it, Kiriha was sitting next to him at the table. She'd brought a pitcher of tea and was pouring it into glasses for both of them. It was a simple, everyday gesture, but it looked so incredibly loving and gentle to Koutarou—so much so that he actively had to keep himself from saying anything stupid. But since he no longer needed to keep secrets from her, he decided to answer her question honestly.

“Kiriha-san, you said you'd invade my life, right?”

“Indeed.”

“I was just... realizing that you were serious about it.”

“Then that's one step forward for me.”

After setting a glass down in front of Koutarou, she turned to him. Her wide eyes were filled with a warm, affectionate look. She'd been

caught off guard, and she looked at Koutarou like she was trying to take him all in.

“It’s strange... I mean, I feel like you’d forgive me even if I suddenly started strangling you.”

“I know you would only do that if you truly needed to.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I meant.”

“I see. So... are you going to strangle me?”

Kiriha giggled and pulled her collar down some to expose her neck, all as if to say he was welcome to try.

“Of course not. I’d regret it the rest of my life.”

“Hmm... That would be the ultimate invasion in its own way.”

Kiriha continued to giggle as she put her collar back in place. Her wish was to make room for herself in Koutarou’s life and in his heart. For better or worse, she didn’t particularly care what happened to her along the way.

“Hey, enough with the jokes like that. I have no interest in embracing you once you’ve gone cold.”

“Heehee... In other words, you do as long as I’m warm?”

“H-Hey, that’s not what I meant...”

“No?”

“...”

But if things turned out for the worst, she wouldn’t be able to tease Koutarou anymore. That’s why, parallel to her true wish, Kiriha was hoping for the best possible outcome for both of them.

Side: Sanae

Because it was synonymous with goofing off and having fun, Sanae loved summer. But in her eyes, it came with one major drawback—Koutarou wouldn’t let her cling to him because it was too hot. It was a valid complaint, however. It was hot enough as it was under the blazing summer sun, and Sanae leaning on his back only made it worse. Sanae honestly didn’t mind one bit, but Koutarou didn’t share her opinion. She was a light girl, weighing in at about forty kilograms, but even that extra weight tacked on to him made a huge difference in the sweltering heat. So when it was hot out, he tried to keep Sanae at arm’s length.

“That’s why we need to come up with a plan. And fast.”

“Sanae-chan, I think Koutarou-san is completely in the right here.”

Sanae’s two selves—former ghost Sanae-chan and former invalid Sanae-san—were divided on the matter. Sanae-chan was determined to cling to Koutarou no matter what. She believed it was her right and her duty to do so. Sanae-san, on the other hand, was on Koutarou’s side. Firstly, it defied common sense to want to cling to someone in

the dead of summer. And secondly, as a girl, she simply didn't like the idea of pressing her sweaty body against Koutarou.

"You're just embarrassed about clinging to Koutarou, aren't you?"

"Honestly, yes... Surely you understand why I'm reluctant."

"And love will help you overcome that! Love is all!"

"Jeez, you always start with that at times like this..."

The two Sanaes had actually been arguing about this for a while. Sanae-chan and Sanae-san might look like two different people, but in reality, they were one and the same. They were of the same mind and heart, even if they expressed their thoughts and feelings differently. That's why, despite the fact that they both loved Koutarou, they couldn't agree on how to act on it. Sanae-chan was direct and Sanae-san modest, meaning there was a constant struggle between them. It was the kind of conflict most people experienced internally, but with Sanae literally divided, the conflict manifested externally for them.

"Think about it, will you?"

"About what?"

"Animals need air to live, right?"

"Yes."

"And they die if they don't get it, right?"

"Normally... I should think so, but there are a few exceptions."

"Well, it's the same for me. Koutarou's like air and I'll die without him."

"I don't think you'll actually die..."

"No logical retorts allowed in conversations from the heart!"

"Augh..."

But even though they butted heads, Sanae-chan normally ended up getting her way. The meek Sanae-san was rarely able to win out against the brash Sanae-chan, and today was shaping up to be no exception.

"Well, I honestly wouldn't mind getting to cling to Koutarou-san..."

"Right?"

"But don't you ever think about showing him your womanly side and not just forcing your own feelings on him?"

"Hmm..."

Yet all of a sudden, their argument took an unexpected turn. Sanae-chan was certainly childish, but she wasn't *just* childish anymore. A lot had happened, and she was journeying down the road of maturity in her own way. And right now, the compassion and understanding that had been blossoming in her heart called out to her, telling her that she should become the perfect woman for Koutarou's sake.

"Okay, let's do things your way this time."

“...Thank god...”

Sanae-san instinctively breathed a sigh of relief. Having grown up sickly, she felt especially strongly about not wanting to cause Koutarou any discomfort.

“Now, the real question is... What outfit should I wear to get Koutarou excited when I cling to him?”

“No! That’s not what I meant! You’ve got the totally wrong idea!”

“Oh, I know—a kimono! Or maybe I should go all out with an evening gown!”

“I said that’s not what I meant! I meant clinging to him was the problem, not what you’re wearing!”

All said and done, Sanae-chan was still Sanae-chan. She wouldn’t give in that easily. But perhaps that was for the better. Sanae-chan was helping to break Sanae-san out of her shell, and Sanae-chan’s victory in this case wasn’t exactly a loss for Sanae-san.









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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 17

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis

Edited by Morgan Dreher

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